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# Author's Note

**Hello, readers.**

**First I would like to get a few things out of the way. Alright, just don't use my story to make money, don't copy my story and don't take my characters; I spent a long time getting each one sorted out. Also, I don't own Warriors by Erin Hunter. But the characters are mine, and I did not copy any of them from anyone else's stories. If it is a coincidence and you share name with one of my characters, it wasn't intentional.**

**I do not own the pictures (media) in the beginning of each chapter: I simply recolored them.**

**{{{Update}}}**
**So I just wanted to throw out there that this story is the rough draft. One day, this is going to be edited and revised . Buuuut it 's a long long way off. So please understand that this won't the best writing you've ever seen here in Wattpad, but I work hard at it.**

**Of course, I love to hear feedback from readers so don't be shy to offer constructive criticism!**

**And not trying to get cheesy, but thank you for taking the time to read my story. I really appreciate it!** 😺

# Allegiances

*>>THUNDERCLAN<<*
**LEADER**:
**Badgerstar**- firery black tom with white stripes on face

**DEPUTY**:
**Driftbreeze**-- placid silvery gray she-cat with amber eyes. (*Apprentice: Birdpaw)*

**MEDICINE CAT:**
**Fawndapple**- small brown she-cat with white striped tail and flecked pelt.

**WARRIORS**:
**Scarletfang**- red she-cat with yellow eyes.
**Volefur**- tom with brown spikey fur and yellow eyes.
**Foxtooth**- grumpy brownish red tabby tom with dark yellow eyes.
**Larksong**- sleek black she-cat with green eyes.
**Brightblossom**- white she-cat with green and blue odd eyes.
**Beeflight**- golden tom with black stripes. *(Apprentice: Sunpaw)*
**Ashpelt**- arrogant gray and black tabby tom with brown eyes.
**Fadedleaf**- Cream colored she-cat with darker dapples.
**Sootclaw**- noble tom with long dark gray fur.
**Oakfur**- Golden brown tabby tom. *(Apprentice Woodpaw)*
**Greeneyes**- hot headed cream furred she-cat with emerald eyes.

**APPRENTICES**:
**Woodpaw**- dark brown tabby tom.
**Sunpaw**- Ginger tom with blue eyes.
**Birdpaw**- Bluish gray she-cat with amber eyes.

**ELDERS**:
**Shimmerpelt**- downy gray she-cat, oldest in the Clan.
**Raggedclaw**- cranky orange tabby tom.

**QUEENS**:
**Hollyheart**- calico with green eyes. (*kits: Willowkit, Jaykit and*

*Pouncekit)*
**Fernbelly**- white she-cat with black patches. *(kits: Frostkit and Pondkit)*

**KITS**:
**Jaykit**- bluish silver tom.
**Pondkit**- black she-cat.
**Willowkit**-gray and black tabby she-cat with hazel-green eyes and a blaze on nose.
**Pouncekit**- white she-cat.
**Frostkit**- white she-cat with ginger points and blue eyes

>>***SHADOWCLAN***<<
**LEADER:**
**Frogstar**- untidy gray tom with harsh yellow eyes.

**DEPUTY**:
**Darkheart**- black she-cat with green eyes.

**MEDICINE CAT**:
**Pineshade**- friendly silver tabby she-cat. *(Apprentice: Owlpaw)*

**WARRIORS**:
**Bouncefoot**- ginger tom. (*Apprentice: Flarepaw)*
**Blacktail**- white tom with black tail.
**Marshpelt**- tom with long grayish fur.
**Mallowtail**- she-cat with short brown fur.
**Duskfall**- fluffy gray tom with white markings around face. (*Apprentice: Nimblepaw)*
**Yellowfur**- she-cat with short dingy gray pelt. (*Apprentice: Needlepaw)*
**Tigerleap**- tabby tom.
**Wolffang**- dusky gray tom with yellow eyes.
**Buzzardwing**- black tom with white socks.
**Roseclaw**- firey she-cat with soft gray fur.
**Pricklefoot**- calico she-cat.
**Nightdove**- black and silver tabby she-cat.
**Ravenwing**- black she-cat with bluish sheen and amber eyes.

**APPRENTICES**:
**Flarepaw**- Orange and golden spotted tom.
**Nimblepaw**- agile brown and white tabby she-cat.
**Needlepaw**- tabby tom.
**Owlpaw**- she-cat with soft tawny color and black dapples.

**ELDERS**:
**Stonefoot**- old gray tom.

**QUEENS**:
**Honeytongue**- charismatic golden tabby she-cat. (*kits: Tinykit and Redkit)*

**KITS**:
**Tinykit**- small white she-cat.
**Redkit**- she-cat with ginger fur.

*>>**RIVERCLAN**<<*
**LEADER**:
**Otterstar**-slick brown tom with blue eyes.

**DEPUTY**:
**Reedtail**- reddish brown she-cat.

**MEDICINE CAT**:
**Troutleap**- reluctant silvery gray tom with green eyes.

**WARRIORS**:
**Pikefur**- brown striped tom with yellow eyes.
**Muddypelt**- tom with short gray and brown fur.
**Creeksplash**-she-cat with long fluffy bluish fur and blue eyes. *(Apprentice: Steeppaw)*
**Oceangaze**- pale brown tabby she-cat and blue/green eyes.
**Waterclaw**- violent black and white tom.
**Freckleface**-dappled tabby she-cat. *(Apprentice: Crabpaw)*
**Lilypool**- she-cat with black pelt and creamy spots.
**Pebbletail**- tom with a tiny, short tail from birth.
**Tinypuddle**- small tom with dark ginger fur.
**Cherrybreath**- white she-cat with dark ginger points on face.

**Sharptongue**- black and white tom; formerly a kittypet.
**Falconswoop**- dark brown tabby tom with white socks.
**Lushfern**- she-cat with long black fur.

**APPRENTICES**:
**Steeppaw**- wiry furred tom.
**Crabpaw**- tom with short black pelt.

**ELDERS**:
**Brownpatch**-white tom with large brown patches and 3 legs due to badger attack.

**QUEENS**:
**Shallowcove**- beige she-cat. (*kits: Longkit and Milkykit)*

**KITS**:
**Longkit**- golden furred she-cat with black dapples.
**Milkykit**-creamy she-cat.

*> > **WINDCLAN** < <*
**LEADER**:
**Runningstar**- lithe brown tabby tom.

**DEPUTY**:
**Gorsetail**- light golden brown tabby with a barred tail. (*Apprentice: Sparrowpaw)*

**MEDICINE CAT**:
**Cloudwatcher-** pure white tom with amber eyes. (*Apprentice: Springpaw)*

**WARRIORS**:
**Mothdapple**- gray/brown she-cat with black socks.
**Breezewhisker**- light gray tom with darker spots.
**Meadowlark**- pretty tortoiseshell she-cat with hazel eyes.
**Sunnypelt**- golden orange she-cat with brownish-gold eyes. (*Apprentice: Thickpaw*)
**Loudcry**- stone gray tom.
**Tumblewind**- tom with a ruffled brown tabby pelt.

**Haretail**- dusky brown tom with white patches; lost tail to dogs.
**Rabbitnose**- ginger tom.
**Deadweed**- brown and black tabby tom.
**Kestrelclaw**- yellow furred she-cat.
**Horsefoot**- dark brown tabby she-cat.
**Fawneyes**- she-cat with light brown and white dappled fur and brown eyes.
**Hazelfrost**- light brown she-cat with white dusting on fur tips.

**APPRENTICES**:
**Sparrowpaw**- black and white tom.
**Hawkpaw**- tawny brown she-cat.
**Thickpaw**- hefty ash gray tom.
**Springpaw**- golden tom with dark marks on face resembling a cheetah.

**ELDERS**:
**Snaggletooth**-old tom with missing teeth and a twisted front fang.
**Lightwing**- pure white she-cat

# Prologue

[image]

A flame-colored tom padded through a wall of ferns, emerging into a clearing. Moonlight sparkled off of his orange pelt. The underbrush then rustled; three more cats appeared; gray, ginger and a she-cat with a shaggy ashen pelt. They sat in a circle. The ginger tom was the first to speak. "I have called you here today because I have seen the struggle to come for our Clans."

The other cats eyes' widened. "What do you mean?" The ginger she-cat asked. The orange tom rose to his paws.

"The Clans will face another test of faith, courage and endurance. A storm is coming; one that could threaten their survival."

The gray tom lashed his tail in fear. "It-it can't be worse than the Dark Forest Seige, can it?" he hissed.

There was a growl, and the shaggy old she-cat whacked him over the head with her tail. "Fool! You know never to mention that name!"

The ginger tom gave a *mrrrow* of amusement. "No need to be so harsh, Yellowfang."

Yellowfang glared at the toms. "Firestar, you know even thinking about...you know what brings bad luck!" She growled when the gray tom stifled a laugh.

Meanwhile, the ginger she-cat waited impatiently. "So, what will happen?" She pawed the ground anxiously, her green eyes wide.

Firestar laid his tail across her back. "No need to worry, Sandstorm, we shall send a sign. I already know who to give it to."

Sandstorm snorted. "If you're sure....shouldn't we try to stop it? The storm I mean?"

Firestar shook his head. "There is nothing that we can do but send warnings-- remember, we aren't alive anymore."

The gray tom lifted his tail. "May I ask, Firestar, but who will you send it to? A medicine cat? Perhaps a leader? I recommend ThunderClan"

Firestar gave a hint of a smile. "Graystripe, I think that it's time for new heroes to rise...I will send the sign to Willowkit,"

The other cats' jaws dropped open in shock. Yellowfang began to bristle. "Firestar, you're making a mistake! To a *kit?* Send it to a medicine cat, but Willowkit cannot even catch her own prey!" She stood to walk away, but Firestar called after her.

"Wait,"

Yellowfang turned, glaring. "I will send it to her as an apprentice, maybe as a young warrior. Do not fear, she will do well..." He said cryptically. Sandstorm looked at him through narrowed eyes.

Graystripe, his usual humor gone, flattened his ears. "How do you know this?" He asked.

Sandstorm spoke up. "Firestar, you are putting the fate of the Clans in this kit's paws. I hope you know what you're doing."

A gleam appeared in Firestar's eyes. "I would hope you of all cats could realize this, Sandstorm. Willowkit is our kin"

*A/N sorry that this isn't written well. I did this a long, long time ago. Trust me, it gets better than these bland sentences. Bear with me here!*

# Chapter 1 > > Departure

[image]

Leaves rustled as Frostkit and Willowkit trodded noisily through them, squealing. Their noise echoed off of the gorge walls. "You nasty ShadowClan warrior! Don't you dare invade ThunderClan again, or I'll rip you to shreds!" Frostkit mewled and pounced on Willowkit's tail. Willowkit squeaked in alarm, dashing off to the shelter of the Warrior's den.

Early dawn light was just beginning to show over the horizon. The dawn patrols would be leaving soon to check the borders. Meanwhile, Frostkit chased her friend straight into Foxtooth, a rather grumpy red tabby warrior. Willowkit stumbled, landing right on top of the sleeping tom's face.

The warrior hissed and shoved Willowkit off. "Why you little piece of-" He lowered his voice to a whisper, cursing at the kits. He sat up, eyes bleary with sleep. "Can't a warrior get any rest around here?" He swiped his tongue several times over his ruffled pelt.

The two kits stared up at Foxtooth in awe; he was one of the tallest and strongest cats in the Clan. "What are you looking at? Get outta here!" He hissed. Other warriors stirred at the commotion, some opening their eyes.

Larksong, his mate, murmured, "No need to be so harsh, they're just kits," Foxtooth snorted and pushed his way out of the den. Driftbreeze the deputy, yawned and followed Foxtooth out. The two kits slunk out of the den, tails drooping.

"Willowkit! Frostkit!" The kits' ears pricked. Frostkit's mother, Fernbelly was calling them from the entrance to the nursery.

"Race you!" Willowkit mewed, and dashed across the clearing. Frostkit was hot on her paws as they skidded to a halt outside the nursery.

"Watch where you're going!" A cat hissed. Willowkit looked for who had snapped at her. She spotted Sunpaw glaring at them. Sunpaw had just been apprenticed last sunrise, but acted as if he was a senior warrior. Shrugging off his remark, she whirled around on Frostkit.

"Beat you!" She crowed. With a mew of triumph, the tiny kit leapt into the nursery. Frostkit trailed behind her friend, flopping on her side. "Whew," she panted.

Fernbelly stuck her head in. "Didn't you hear me? I said be careful around Pouncekit and Jaykit," she chided. "They are weak, and need rest,"

The kits looked at Hollyheart, Willowkit's mother. The brown tabby queen lay in the corner of the den, pelt matted and ruffled. Even though it wasn't even leafbare, Hollyheart's other kits were weak and ill, and it had only gotten worse. Both  were racked with coughs that shook their tiny frames.

Willowkit frowned at her mother's state, but turned to Fernbelly. "May we please go and watch Driftbreeze ?" They put on their best innocent kit faces, complete with inky eyes.
Fernbelly purred, "of course, loves. Just don't get in anycat's way, alright?"

"We promise," Frostkit mewed. As they passed by Fernbelly, she gave them a lick on the top of the head.

Willowkit grunted, pawing at her head. "Fernbellllly, we're hardly kits anymore!" She protested stubbornly.

Fernbelly only smiled, meowing, "only a moon until you become apprentices... StarClan, how time flies!"

Driftbreeze stood at the center of the camp right about to organize patrols. Frostkit took the lead, bounding to the deputy squealing.

Driftbreeze raised her voice so that the Clan could hear over the kits' mewls. "Beeflight, how about you take Sunpaw and Greeneyes and do a quick round at the ShadowClan border? I thought I

smelled some of their scent on our territory..." Beeflight nodded and motioned Sunpaw over with a wave of his tail. Greeneyes joined them. Beeflight led the patrol out of camp. "Hunting patrol..." Driftbreeze murmured, scanning the clearing.

Willowkit wriggled to stand in front of the silvery gray tabby. "Pick me! I'll go!" Willowkit danced around the deputy gleefully.

Frostkit picked up the hint and joined her friend. "Yeah! We can go! We'll get the fattest mouse in the forest!" She sang.

Driftbreeze looked down at the eager kits, her warm amber eyes sympathetic. "You cannot go out of camp for another moon," she meowed, and selected the cats for the dawn hunting patrol. Frostkit and Willowkits' tails drooped in disappointment. Driftbreeze took notice, and nudged them with a soft paw. "Hey, look!" she nodded towards Bagderstar, who was chewing on a mouse. "It's a RiverClan warrior on our territory! Go get him!" The kits' eyes sparked with interest as they dropped into a lopsided hunting crouch. They held themselves low against the ground. "Tuck in your tail," Driftbreeze meowed. They hastily did as the deputy said. Willowkit stalked forward, ears flat on her head.

When they were close behind Badgerstar, Frostkit screeched, "Attack!" and the two best friends leaped on their badger-striped leader.

Badgerstar hissed, shaking off the kits, but when caught the amused gleam in his mate's eyes, he played along. "Get out of here, fishbreath!" Willowkit snarled, pummeling Badgerstar with her small hind paws. Badgerstar grunted, falling to his side in mock defeat. Frostkit nibbled at his ears. Badgerstar flattened them and swiped at Willowkit with a gentle paw.

"Frostkit, what do you think you're doing?" It was Fernbelly, shrieking at her daughter. Both kits leaped off and pretended like nothing ever happened.

"Wow, you really got me!" Badgerstar grunted, faking a limp. The kits puffed out their chests proudly.

"Come here, now!" Fernbelly growled.

Badgerstar waved his tail. "Don't worry Fernbelly; I enjoy kits...from time to time." He gave a *mrrrow* of laughter.

Fernbelly's expression softened, and she twitched her whiskers, waving her tail for the kits come.

Frostkit and Willowkit bounded over- they knew better than to be arguing with a queen. But their eyes were still shining.

"Since you two cannot seem to behave yourselves, you can stay in the nursery!" Fernbelly flicked her tail crossly. "Stay away from Jaykit and Pouncekit, though!" She added over her shoulder.

Frostkit and Willowkit padded quietly into the den. As they passed by the kits, they uttered coughs that sent them trembling afterwards. Willowkit looked sadly at her siblings, feeling guilty that there was nothing she could do.

Frostkit pawed at her bedding. "Where is Pondkit?" She mewed.

"Helping Fawndapple," Hollyheart replied, raising her head from her sickly kits.

Frostkit sighed. "I wish she could get her nose out of old plants and play with us!" She kicked a scrap of moss absently.

"Show more respect, Frostkit. I know it's hard right now, but if that's what Pondkit wishes to do, then let her. Once Willowkit's littermates get better, you can all play together." Hollyheart told her sternly. There was a hint wistfulness in her tone.

Both kits nodded reluctantly and settled down in the den. They rested on nests of feather-soft moss, freshly collected by the apprentices. Hollyheart nearly jumped out her fur when Pouncekit began hacking again, this time with so much force that he struggled to find breath afterwards. The queen rasped her tongue over his little chest in an attempt to clear him up while sickness dripped out of his nose at a constant flow. Willowkit watched helplessly as Hollyheart cringed every time one of them sniffled. She sighed and wrapped her tail over her nose. Frostkit had already fallen asleep,

oblivious to the chaos about to ensue.

Up close, Willowkit could tell how tired her mother was. Her brown fur was matted, and her usual clear blue eyes were dull and unfocused. She crawled over to Hollyheart and softly nudged her with a small paw. The tired queen looked over at her only healthy kit.

"They aren't going to get better, are they?" Willowkit whispered. Hollyheart's expression changed to one of utter defeat, and then quickly softened, as not to frighten her.

"Of course they will. Fawndapple will give them the right herbs and then they will feel all better." But she sounded like she was trying to convince herself more than her kit. Willowkit snuggled up to her mother, breathing in her milky scent. She stared down at her brother and sister.

*They look close to StarClan.* She thought sadly.

Her heart sank at the thought of losing her siblings. Closing her eyes, she let herself think of happier thoughts, like becoming an apprentice and catching the biggest mouse in the forest. Just as she drifting off, the steady thud of pawsteps sounded outside of the nursery. Willowkit forced her breathing to slow and a content look to spread across her face. Oakfur poked his head inside the den.

"How are the kits doing?" he asked anxiously.

Hollyheart glanced over at Willowkit. She seemed satisfied that she was asleep, so began.
Giving a heavy side, Hollyheart meowed, "Not good. Fawndapple has tried everything; they won't stop coughing." She touched her nose to Pouncekit, who sneezed softly. Oakfur licked his son and daughter then nuzzled his mate.

Suddenly Jaykit bolted upright, eyes wild. Willowkit squinted to see what was happening. His jaws were open in a soundless yowl. Hollyheart and Oakfur were frozen to their spot. Jaykit scrambled at the moss nest with his claws. He bent over and tried to cough, but couldn't force air out.

"He's choking!" Hollyheart exclaimed.

"I'll fetch Fawndapple!" Oakfur called, already rushing out of the den. Pouncekit awoke too and started coughing. Willowkit leaped up, mewing to Frostkit. The commotion caused a chain reaction, and soon the whole camp gathered around the nursery. Suddenly, the nursery did not feel like a calm and safe place.

Fawndapple shouldered through the crowd, carrying a bundle of herbs in her jaws. Pondkit began to follow her, but Fernbelly ushered her away.

"Come out, Frostkit and Willowkit!" She then called. The two friends exchanged a terrified glance and dashed out of the den.

The Clan was murmuring, craning their heads to get a glimpse. Badgerstar emerged from his den. Assessing the situation, he waved his tail for the cats to disperse.

"Get back to your duties," he growled, padding over to the cluster of cats.

Looking over at her leader Brightblossom meowed, "but Jaykit is choking!"

Badgerstar's eyes darkened. "I know. Fawndapple is doing her best, but it won't help if you stare at her. Brightblossom, lead a hunting patrol with Ashpelt and Scarletfang by the WindClan border." The white she-cat reluctantly gathered her warriors and left, but not without one last glance inside the nursery. The rest of the Clan dispersed soon after.

Fernbelly led the kits to the side of the camp, where the sun was warm.

"Fernbelly, what's going on?" Pondkit asked.

Willowkit saw this as her opportunity to slip away. While Fernbelly was answering Pondkit, she tapped Frostkit with the tip of her tail. "Hey," she meowed. Frostkit met her eyes. "I know a secret way to spy on the nursery!" She whispered.

Frostkit bounced on her paws.

Willowkit slunk away, edging along the side of the gorge, careful to stay away from the groups of cats not yet ready to leave. She kept to the shadows, darting from one spot to the next agilely.

Frostkit followed, although she was more clumsy, and tripped on a rock with a loud mew. Thankfully, she was not seen by the others. Finally they reached the nursery. Willowkit crept behind it. Knowing that they were less than a fox-length from the ordeal, she tried to be as quiet as an owl's wings.

Frostkit did well to remain silent this time. They found a thin area in the nursery walls and pressed their ears to it.

*Paws scuffled. Fawndapple massaged Jaykit's throat with deft paws. Hollyheart and Oakfur watched intently, their eyes round with worry. "Will he be okay?" She meowed, almost to soft for Willowkit and Frostkit to hear.*

*Fawndapple hesitated before answering. "I will try my best, but it is now up to StarClan." Oakfur laid his tail on Hollyheart's. She buried her head in her mate's golden-brown fur. Fawndapple pried open the kit's little jaws, despite him resisting.* Willowkit and Frostkit heard a gasp that wasn't so stifled. *Hollyheart leaped up from her nest, knocking over Pouncekit, who mewled in distress.*

*"What is wrong?" She hissed.*

*The medicine cat lowered her head in defeat. "His...his throat is so swollen that he choked on his own sickness. Hollyheart..." She could not even meet the queen's eyes. "He is not going to live."*

*Hollyheart dropped to the floor of the den, her breath coming in gasps. Oakfur wasn't much better, just holding in a yowl.* Willowkit's heart dropped when she heard the news. Her suspicions had been right. Frostkit nuzzled her friend.

Fawndapple was a young medicine cat, only granted her full name three moons ago after her mentor died of greencough. She was not very experienced in dealing with kits. *She closed her eyes, hating that*

*she could not save this kit.*

*Hollyheart watched helplessly as Jaykit tried to cough again, but could not breathe in. His eyes bulged out as he gasped for air.* Willowkit wanted to look away from her brother's slow death but could not pry her eyes away.

*Then, Oakfur's eyes blazed with grief and fury. He whirled around to face Fawndapple. "Isn't there anything that you can do?" He growled, lashing his tail. "Make him stop suffering!" His meow had risen to a yowl, and the whole of ThunderClan pricked their ears to listen.*

Willowkit pressed herself to the ground, feeling her father's words shatter the air.

*"No, I can't do any-anything. I am very sorry," Fawndapple murmured. Oakfur nudged Jaykit with his nose. The kit held no response. Fawndapple dipped her head respectfully and backed out of the nursery.* The Clan fell silent, all eyes on the medicine cat.

Frostkit nosed Willowkit. "We got to go, Fernbelly is probably looking for us." She mewed. Willowkit nodded and followed her friend back out into the gorge. They spotted Fawndapple pad away into Badgerstar's den. But before they could even think about eavesdropping on them, Fernbelly trailed by Pondkit rushed up.

"Where in the name of StarClan have you been? I have been calling your names for the past sunrise!" She scolded them.

Willowkit pawed the ground. "Sorry, we were...um, talking with Driftbreeze about Hollyheart." She lied.

Fernbelly's eyes became sympathetic. "This must be very hard on you kits." She meowed, sweeping a gaze over Pondkit, Willowkit and Frostkit. "Come over here, and let me tell you a story that you ought to know." The kits rushed after Fernbelly.

"Which story are you going to tell us? Is it the one about finding this territory?" Pondkit asked. She was always fascinated with what the outside world was like. Fernbelly shook her head.
"I am too old for stories!" Willowkit mewed indignantly.

Fernbelly laid down in a ray of sunshine. "Are you too old to hear a legend about one of the greatest Clan cats to have ever lived?" Her whiskers quivered with amusement when all three kits pricked their ears.

"There was a cat, countless seasons ago who lived in a twoleg den--"

"A kittypet?" Frostkit shrieked.

Fernbelly silenced her daughter with a wave of her tail. "But this cat was unlike any cat before or after him. He was always intrigued with the vast expanse of forest that bordered his twoleg den. Mind you, this was in our old territory before it was churned up by twoleg monsters. One day, this kittypet decided to venture out and explore. He was ambushed by a young ThunderClan apprentice who attempted to attack him. But instead of most kittypets, who would turn and run back to the safety of their twoleg dens, this kittypet turned and fought. It was then that he met ThunderClan's leader, who offered him a place among warriors. Obviously he accepted and was led right into ThunderClan camp. While the leader was announcing his arrival, one cat doubted this kittypet. They had a short scuffle, in which his collar snapped off. The leader named him Firepaw in honor of his brilliant flame-colored pelt. Little did Firepaw know, that there was a prophecy that revolved around him, and he would soon hold the Clan's future in his paws.

"As an apprentice, Firepaw brought WindClan back from being driven out by ShadowClan. He also suspected Tigerclaw's evil deeds." The kits gasped at his name. "As a warrior, he uncovered Tigerclaw's treachery when the tabby tried to kill ThunderClan's leader. That drove the cold-hearted cat out of ThunderClan. Fireheart later became Firestar. Firestar united with WindClan to form LionClan when RiverClan and ShadowClan became TigerClan. Now, before Firestar had even been born, his propechy had said, 'Fire alone will save the Clan'. And save the Clan he did-the entire forest!

"Tigerstar, now leader of ShadowClan had brought a lawless group of cats to help them fight against LionClan. Their name was BloodClan, but they were not a true Clan, as they did not believe in StarClan or have the Warrior Code. Their leader was a small black

tom by the name of Scourge. They say that he wore a collar studded with the fangs of dogs he had killed and that his claws were reinforced with dog teeth!" The kits huddled together, eyes wide with fear.

"Tigerstar did not see that BloodClan was never going to fight for him-his eyes were too clouded with revenge. I will not describe the horrible things he did to half-clan cats, but I will say that many cats died because of it. But, as all the Clans met with BloodClan, Scourge ripped all of Tigerstar's nine lives from him with a single blow. Following this, all the Clans fought against BloodClan. They were almost outnumbered. This battle was one to be remembered for seasons to come. Scourge took one of Firestar's lives, but he lacked what all Clan leaders have- nine lives. So when Firestar brought down the terrible cat, his death was permanent. That day, many heros fell, but many heros rose, too.

"Firestar continued his legendary deeds. He rebuilt the 5th lost Clan, Skyclan from scratch with the help of his loyal mate, Sandstorm. And when the twolegs began swallowing the forest and poisoning the streams, he helped lead the Clans to their new homes-here. He was always level-headed and diplomatic. One to stand for what he believes in. And his grandchildren followed in his pawprints. For it was they who held the power of stars in their paws. Lionblaze, Jayfeather and Dovewing.

"The coming battle was even darker than the one with BloodClan. It was with the cats of the Place of No Stars, where those rejected from StarClan went. The Dark Forest cats trained the living, turning them against their own Clans. But just as they were about to lay siege on the living, the Three discovered a new piece to the prophecy. 'Three must become four to battle the darkness that lasts forever.' They were frantic. Who would the fourth cat be? The answer? Firestar. So when the Dark Forest cats and their living allies attacked the Clan cats, the Four joined together and battled. It wasn't just the Dark Forest and Clan cats, though. StarClan themselves came down from Silverpelt. The Ancients, cats before the Clans came. Even Midnight the Badger fought. Because, if the Dark Forest would have won, the Clans would have been gone forever. Now, Tigerstar still wanted revenge, particularly on

Firestar. They faced off. Firestar was on his last life, and if Tigerstar was killed, he would fade away into nothingness. They battle with the strength of TigerClan. Firestar killed wretched Tigerstar but died in the process. A bolt of lightning signaled his arrival into the stars. So you may think that the 'Fire alone' prophecy meant only his battle with BloodClan, but it meant that he would save the Clans in their greatest time of need: the Dark Forest Siege."

Frostkit, Willowkit and Pondkit were gaping in astonishment, eyes round disks. Fernbelly gave a mrrow of amusement. "I remember my first time hearing about the Legend of Firestar. One day, you too will know it by heart."

"Wow," Frostkit whispered.

"How did he do all of that?" Willowkit murmured.

"Faith, and the courage to do what is right, even though it may not be easy. You kits should take Firestar as an example of a role model. True, he wasn't forest born, he became one of the most revered Clan cats of all time."

# Chapter 2 > > Apprentices

[image]

In the following moon, Willowkit's only remaining sibling died from greencough. Hollyheart sank even deeper into despair, blaming herself for not being able to save them, even though there was nothing she could have done. Oakfur grew quieter too, but Willowkit made attempts to keep his spirits up, which was difficult. She had tried to cheer him up by asking for badger rides and tossing moss balls at him. It would work for a short time; father and daughter playing without a care, but then Oakfur would become solemn again. If it wasn't for Frostkit, Willowkit would have been bored out of her mind. Pondkit was never around, for she was always talking with the elders or asking Fawndapple questions.

Meanwhile, the young medicine cat had become more reserved since the deaths of Jaykit and Pouncekit. It didn't help that Oakfur refused to speak with her.

Hollyheart was more kind to Fawndapple but did not chat the day away with her. Frostkit was truly Willowkit's only friend in ThunderClan. They would play Keep-Away-The-Moss and ShadowClan invasion from sunrise until the first star appeared in the sky.

One afternoon, Badgerstar emerged from his den and leaped up onto Rockpile.

It was a cool leaf-fall day; the grass was turning dry and spiky and the leaves on the trees began to turn vibrant shades of colors. Birds twittered and rodents scurried about, trying to gather the last nuts before the cold leaf-bare came. A chilly breeze blew from the Southern Mountains to signal the fast approach of colder, snowy days, while the fresh-kill pile was doing well but showed signs of shrinking within the moon.

The leader gazed down at his Clan proudly. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath Rockpile for a clan

meeting!" He called, his voice thrumming through the gorge.

Driftbreeze joined her mate, standing at the Rockpile's base. Scarletfang, Volefur, Foxtooth and Larksong stood from the freshkill pile and padded over. Brightblossom wrapped up her conversation with Beeflight and followed her Clanmates. Ashpelt, Fadedleaf, Sootclaw, Oakfur and Greeneyes padded through the tunnel, returning from border patrol. Fawndapple poked her head from inside the medicine den. The apprentices quit their boasting to race each other to the Rockpile, and the elders stiffly walked out of their den.

Hollyheart raced out of the nursery, Fernbelly hot on her heels. Pondkit toddled out of the medicine cat den, looking quizzically at her clan. Fernbelly herded her kits over to one side and rasped her tongue over their heads, much to their dislike.

For the first time in a long while, Hollyheart's eyes lit up with joy. She groomed Willowkit's fur aggressively. "You look as if you rolled in a patch of brambles! Look nicer for your apprentice ceremony!" She scolded in a motherly way. Willowkit's heart gave a leap. That's right! Today was the day she would become an apprentice of ThunderClan! Hollyheart gave Willowkit one final lick on the top of the head, flattening her fur which was spiked in nerves. Fernbelly finished correcting Frostkit's posture and sent them to the meeting with a flick of her tail. "Be on your behavior and keep your head held high- you're not in WindClan!" Hollyheart meowed, and gave her daughter a nuzzle. Willlowkit rolled her eyes good-heartedly and padded up to Pondkit and Frostkit. Pondkit and Frostkit's eyes glowed, and Willowkit was sure hers were sparkling too.

Willowkit shifted her paws anxiously. She began to think of things going wrong. *What if I stumble, or say the wrong thing? What if I get a mean mentor?* She eyed Foxtooth warily.

Badgerstar swept his gaze over the assembled cats. "I have called the Clan together for one of the most important moments in Clan life." He meowed. "Six moons ago, Frostkit, Pondkit, and Willowkit arrived into the Clan. Now, they are ready to become apprentices." He raised his tail. "Step forward," Willowkit's paws froze to the ground, but she then stumbled forward. Her ear tips grew red and

she could feel her fur puffing out slightly. *What if Badgerstar thinks I'm too clumsy to be an apprentice?* But Badgerstar continued, not even noticing Willowpaw's stumble.

"Frostkit," Badgerstar's mew rang clearly through the gorge. Frostkit held her breath. "From this day forward until you receive your warrior name, you shall be known as Frostpaw. StarClan, I ask you to guide this new apprentice. Set her paws on the path she must follow to become a warrior." Frostkit tensed a little, wondering who her mentor would be. "Ashpelt," Badgerstar nodded at the gray and black tabby tom. "You will be mentor to Frostpaw. Your battle and hunting skills are next to none and I know you will pass these qualities on to Frostpaw." Frostpaw trotted over nervously to Ashpelt. He had a reputation for being stuck-up and a little snotty. But as Frostpaw touched noses with him, she noticed that his eyes were warm.

"Willowkit, from this day forward, until you receive your warrior name, you shall be called Willowpaw." Badgerstar said. Willowpaw couldn't help but wriggle with excitement. She was an apprentice at last! But then she wondered who her mentor would be. Anybody but Greeneyes! She was mean and always had a word of criticism. "StarClan guide this apprentice's paws on a noble path. Brightblossom." Badgerstar meowed. Willowpaw beamed. Brightblossom was a young warrior and she was known to be enthusiastic. "You will mentor Willowpaw. You are quick on your paws and a bright thinker. I know you will pass on these qualities onto Willowpaw." Willowpaw bounded up to Brightblossom and gingerly touched noses with her. Brightblossom's eyes shone with happiness.

"I know I'm not incredibly older than you, but I'll do my best!" She whispered.

Willowpaw gave a little hop. "This will be so fun!"

Badgerstar repeated the ceremony once more for Pondkit. "Your mentor will be Fawndapple. May StarClan grant you the wisdom and patience needed to become a medicine cat."

Pondkit couldn't help but give an excited squeal and seemed to

bump noses with Fawndapple.
"Frostpaw! Willowpaw! Pondpaw!" The Clan cheered. The three new apprentices soaked up the attention. Badgerstar leaped down from Highledge and vanished into his den. Fawndapple led Pondpaw out of camp, probably going to show her the best places to gather herbs.

"So what's the first thing we're going to do? Border Patrol? Battle training? Ohhh! Maybe a tour of the territory?" Willowpaw looked up at Brightblossom's oddeyes.

"Slow down, Windstar!" She gave a *mrrow* of amusement. "Lets check with Ashpelt first. Maybe we could go all together?" Brightblossom suggested. She called Ashpelt over.

"What do you want?" He replied, Frostpaw following just behind.

"How about we take the apprentices for a tour of the territory?" She suggested.

Ashpelt shrugged. "Sure," he meowed.

Brightblossom led the group through the enterance and out into ThunderClan territory. "First, lets go to the lake. That's where I first went as an apprentice!" she raced away. Ashpelt sighed but followed suit, his toned legs giving him an extra spring in his pace.

Frostpaw slyly looked at Willowpaw. "Race you!" she said and darted after her mentor. Willowpaw narrowed her eyes and sprinted after her friend. Running through the forest was harder than she had imagined. Tree roots and pebbles threatened to trip her or slow her down. Spiky brambles tugged at her fur. Frostpaw was having a hard time too.

"How do they run so fast?" She puffed, flicking her tail at Brightblossom and Ashpelt's tracks.

Willowpaw shrugged. "They are warriors," she said. Frostpaw squinted to try to see up ahead. "Hey, I can scent something!" Willowpaw mewed. Instead of the leafy musk of the woods, a new scent tickled her nose. It smelled of wide open air and a huge

expanse of water.

"Is that...the lake?" Frostpaw gasped. A new burst of energy surged through her paws. She pushed through the undergrowth . Just through the next stand of trees she could spot a line of blue.

"I see it!" Willowpaw called. They raced up ahead. They could now see their mentors watching them struggle through the forest.

"What took you so long?" Brightblossom joked.

"You left us!" Frostpaw protested between pants.

"You gotta keep up." Ashpelt snorted.

Brightblossom nudged him playfully. "Aw, they're new apprentices. We should have gone easier on them." She said. Ashpelt just grunted. They waited for the apprentices to catch up.

"Wow," They both breathed. The vast expanse of the lake stretched out in front of them. Sparkling blue waters washed over the sandy shore, and just out in the distance a small island sat.

"What's that?" Frostpaw asked, nodding to it.

Brightblossom responded. "That's the Gathering Island, where the Clans meet every moon in peace."

"When do we get to go?" Willowpaw asked.

"This upcoming moon actually." Brightblossom said.

Ashpelt pointed with his tail to a stand cluster of pine trees. "That's ShadowClan territory. Stay away from there, they're nothing but a bunch of mousehearts." He warned.

Frostpaw's face fell. "Will they attack us if we go over there?"

Ashpelt rolled his eyes. "Well, they certainly won't invite you to share tongues with them." He retorted.

Brightblossom sensed the slight tension. "Over there is RiverClan

territory. We don't see much of them because our territory doesn't touch theirs. Now that, is WindClan territory. See, the one with the hills?" She swiveled her ears for the corresponding territory.

"Is WindClan friendly?" Frostpaw asked.

Ashpelt lashed his tail in annoyance. "Pick any Clan and they will gladly rip off your pelt off if you set a paw on their border." He growled.

There was an awkward silence for a few moments before Willowpaw asked, "Where is SkyClan?" She asked. Both mentors' eyes narrowed in confusion. Then, realization sparked in Brightblossom's eyes

"Ohh, SkyClan. They aren't in the forest. They live far away from here." She said.

"Then how do they attend Gatherings?" Willowpaw asked.

"They don't. I'm not sure what they do, or any details about their life, since I don't live there, but I assume they must have some kind of meeting every moon." She said.

Willowpaw nodded, and then turned her eyes toward the mountains, whose peaks were merely pale rises in the far distance. "Wow, what are those! Is there a Clan up there?" She asked.

Ashpelt closed his eyes again. "Keep your mind on our Clans, not distant places!" he snapped.

But Brightblossom responded. "There is a tribe of cats up there, yes. But they aren't called a Clan, they are the Tribe of Rushing Water. They are not anything like the Clans though. But I agree with Ashpelt. Let's keep our focus on ThunderClan, and just that."

Willowpaw nodded again. Frostpaw shot a nervous glance up at the sun. It was at its highest point in the sky. "Can we keep moving? I want to see the whole territory!" She mewed.

Brightblossom *mrrowed.* "Don't worry, Frostpaw, we'll have more than enough time." She motioned with her tail and trotted through

the bushes.

As Willowpaw caught up to her, she whispered, "you're curious and that's a good thing. It means you're open-minded. But Ashpelt is neither of which. I'd be happy to answer your questions, just not too many!" She flicked her ears happily. "And if you want to learn more about SkyClan, you should ask Firestar himself!" Brightblossom waved her tail in amusement and then pulled ahead, leaving Willowpaw hungry to know more.

The cats continued their tour of the territory. Their paws crunched on the falling leaves. It was mid-leaf-fall and the trees were shedding their leaves to prepare for leaf-bare. A wind blew across the forest, bringing with it a hint of a chill. Squirrels chattered for the last time before they would sleep leafbare away. The days had grown shorter with longer nights.

So, as Willowpaw bounded through the trees, she wondered what the forest must look like in Greenleaf, with bursting green leaves and singing birds.

Until the sun sank down over the horizon, Ashpelt and Brightblossom showed the apprentices the ShadowClan border, WindClan border and a few other places like the training hollow and the Great Oak. By the time they returned to camp, Frostpaw and Willowpaw's paws ached.

"My paws feel like they're dropping off!" She whined. Frostpaw groaned in agreement. They padded through the camp entrance wearily. Willowpaw took a sparrow from the fresh-kill pile. The two of them slumped down in a patch of sunshine, sharing the bird. Willowpaw savored the meat. Strangely, it tasted more satisfying and filling.

"But that was so much fun! I can't wait for tomorrow!" Willowpaw mewed excitedly.

"I can't wait until they show us battle moves!" Frostpaw meowed.

"I want to learn how to track other cats or how to stalk a mouse." Willowpaw said.

Frostpaw stared at her. "That's booooring. I want to fight!" She leapt to her paws and struck out her front paws in the air, then whirled around and kicked with her back legs.

"What are you doing?" A scornful voice meowed. Both apprentices looked up to see Greeneyes. "Fighting imaginary butterflies? Maybe you should go back to the nursery!" She laughed. Frostpaw shrunk back from the warrior's hurtful words. Willowpaw narrowed her eyes in anger. Frostpaw opened her jaws to retort but Greeneyes whipped her tail. "Want to say something, Frostkit?" She sneered at Frostpaw's hurt expression. She drew her tail tight around her and crouched down, eyes cast upon the ground. Willowpaw shot daggers at Greeneyes. The young she-cat left and padded to the warriors den, dipping her head to Fadedleaf on her way in.

Willowpaw bared her teeth at her before turning to Frostpaw. "It's all right, Frostpaw. Greeneyes is just a pile of foxdung!" Frostpaw smiled, uncurling her tail and sitting up a little straighter. She gave a small sigh.

Small paws thudded on the sun-hardened ground. Willowpaw and Frostpaw spotted Pondpaw trotting up to them. "How did the first day go?" She asked.

Willowpaw rolled over on her back. "It was brilliant! We took a tour of the territory, and got to see the ShadowClan border!" she mewed.

Frostpaw gave her paw a lick. "But now our paws ache from all the running and walking!" She added.

"How was yours?" Willowpaw asked.

Pondpaw hopped into the air a few mouse-lengths. "Incredible! Fawndapple took me to the best places to get herbs. She even took me to the lake. Can you believe how huge it is?" She enthused. "And then when we came back, Greeneyes had a thorn in her paw, so Fawndapple showed me how to get it out."

Willowpaw raised her head. "So that's why she is so grumpy today!" she mewed.

Fawndapple poked her head from the medicine cat den. "Pondpaw, come here! Help me sort these herbs," she said. Pondpaw waved her tail goodbye to Willowpaw and Frostpaw and then whisked away to the medicine den.

Frostpaw watched her sister leave. "I couldn't imagine being cooped up in the medicine den all day. I can't hardly walk in, it stinks so much!"

Willowpaw wrinkled her nose. "Yeah, it's hard to believe you two are sisters, you're so different."
Frostpaw looked over at Willowpaw. "We could be sisters!" She enthused.

"Yeah!" Willowpaw agreed.

The moon was beginning to peak over the trees, just a sliver of light in the starry sky. The warriors were retreating to their den, or finishing up their nightly meal. Brightblossom and Ashpelt padded up to the apprentices.

"Tomorrow we decided that we will be having a group training session with all the apprentices. We'll teach everyone how to distinguish scents." Brightblossom announced. Frostpaw's tail raised.

"Now go get some rest, we'll be waking at dawn tomorrow." Ashpelt said.

Brightblossom nodded towards the apprentice den. "Pick a nest- there should be enough room." And with that, the mentors walked to the warrior's den.

Frostpaw stood and shook the dirt from her pelt. "Ack, that sounds dull. I want to fight! I hope badger comes so I can scare it off." She said, puffing out her fur.

"Have you got bees in your brain? You couldn't take on a badger! It would swallow you whole!" Willowpaw meowed.

Frostpaw flicked her tail. "Whatever. One day, I'll be the best fighter! I'll be leader! Froststar!" Her eyes shone at the thought.

Willowpaw lowered herself to the ground. "Not if I become leader first... Willowstar!" She pounced on Frostpaw, knocking her over.

"Hey!" Frostpaw screeched. She pushed her friend off with a single shove. Willowpaw flew easily off, her small shape skidding on the ground.

Foxtooth stuck his head from the warrior's den. "Do you mind? Some of us are trying to sleep!" He hissed.

Frostpaw and Willowpaw's ears burned with shame. "Sorry," they chimed. With a grunt, Foxtooth disappeared.

"Is it me, or is Foxtooth always sleeping!" Frostpaw muttered.

Willowpaw *mrrrowed*, rose to her paws and waved her tail for Frostpaw to follow.

"You've got leaves all in your pelt," Frostpaw whispered.

"Do you want to get in more trouble?" But as Frostpaw said that, she gave her fur another shake.

The soft woven ferns that structured the apprentice's den rustled as the young cats entered.

Conversation abruptly stopped. Heads turned to see who interrupted their talk. Birdpaw gave Woodpaw and Sunpaw a quick shake of her head.

"Hi," Frostpaw mewed, stepping lightly inside. Willowpaw followed her friend, avoiding the carefully made nests where the apprentices would soon sleep. She chose an empty spot next to Woodpaw, and Frostpaw settled next to her. Sunpaw took a mouthful of moss from his nest and tossed it to Willowpaw. Woodpaw and Birdpaw followed suit, giving up a little of their nest to the new cats. Willowpaw and Frostpaw meowed their thanks, tucking the moss tightly around themselves. While they lowered their heads and drifted to sleep, the other three cats leaned towards each other, murmuring too low to be heard.

# Chapter 3 > > A New Threat

[image]

Early morning light slanted through the walls of the apprentice den. Young cats slowly opened their eyes and stretched their limbs, yawning. Sunpaw gave his paw a couple of quick licks before stretching his legs. Willowpaw rasped her tounge across her chest, then over a paw; which she then dragged over her forehead.

She nudged Frostpaw awake. "C'mon Frostpaw! Do you want to miss our first training session? All the other apprentices will be there!"

Frostpaw's head shot up, a stray bit of moss dangling from her ear. "We're apprentices!" She exclaimed.

"Yeah! Lets go!" Willowpaw mewed, bouncing on her paws.

All the other apprentices were already having their morning meal. Willowpaw led Frostpaw to the fresh-kill pile, choosing a squirrel to share. The fresh-kill pile was now beginning to run low, since the rodents had begun staying in their burrows to escape the chilling weather. Leaf-bare was still several moons away, yet the cold winds were approaching quicker than usual.

The first snow would not be far off.

As Willowpaw and Frostpaw ate, their mentors emerged from the warriors den. They padded to the fresh-kill pile to take a sparrow. Willowpaw's paws tingled with excitement. Their first real session! And with other apprentices, too!

Driftbreeze walked over to Birdpaw, motioning with her tail to come. Brightblossom and Ashpelt watched Beeflight and Oakfur collect their apprentices.

"Hold on, you two. Let me finish my bird." She meowed. She took another bite, drew her tounge over her bloody jaws and stood.

While they waited for Ashpelt to finish, Willowpaw couldn't help staring at her mentor's eyes. One was the color of a clear summer sky, without a single cloud in sight. The other was grass in the spring; bright green with darker flecks.

At last, Ashpelt rose to his paws and led them to the entrance of camp, where the other cats waited.

"Ready?" Driftbreeze asked. Everyone gave a short nod of the head. The deputy waved her tail and bounded off into the trees.

———————

"Willowpaw, Brightblossom, Sunpaw, Beeflight, Ashpelt and Woodpaw. You practice over there in the clearing. Birdpaw, Oakfur, Frostpaw and I will be over here by the Great Oak." The two groups divided and padded to their assigned places. Frostpaw and Willowpaw exchanged a sad glance at the fact that they became separated, but didn't object.

"Alright, I was thinking that we could do scent identifying." Beeflight suggested.

"That's a great idea! We can sneak up on the apprentices and let them guess." Bightblossom added.

Ashpelt snorted. "Won't that get old?"

Beeflight flicked his ears. "We can make it more challenging." He said.

Sunpaw was up first. He sat in the middle of the small clearing, eyes closed. The other cats gathered in front of him.

Ashpelt waved his tail to Brightblossom. She nodded and padded away into the forest.

A few moments later, Ashpelt meowed, "Who left?"

Sunpaw tilted his head and thought for a moment. "Bee...no, Brightblossom?" he guessed, clearly unsure.

"Postive?" Ashpelt pressed.

Sunpaw lashed his tail. "No, its Beeflight, isn't it?"

"Open your eyes."

Sunpaw blinked and scanned the cats. "Mousedung!" he cursed.

"Watch your tongue, Sunpaw. And why'd you say Beeflight?" Sunpaw cast his eyes at the ground, shuffling his paws. He shrugged.

Ashpelt narrowed his eyes. "If it was an ambush from ShadowClan, we'd be dead."

"I thought the Warrior Code said that we don't kill...?" Woodpaw chirped.

"Obviously I didn't mean it literally!" Ashpelt retorted.

"It's okay, Sunpaw." Beeflight meowed. "You're still learning."

Sunpaw growled and stalked over to Willowpaw and his brother. "That's not good enough," he muttered.

Willowpaw touched his shoulder with her tail. "Don't worry, you almost had it." She mewed. Sunpaw fixed his bright blue eyes on her. He longed there for a moment, then shrugged her tail off and averted his gaze.

Brightblossom trotted back in the clearing. "How did it go?" She asked cheerfully. But based on Sunpaw's expression, she lowered her head.

"Woodpaw, you're next." Beeflight meowed.

The dark brown apprentice plodded to the center and sat, wrapping his tail around his paws. He shut his eyes tight. Ashpelt left and after a while, he guessed right. Lastly, Willowpaw made her way front and center. Her fur felt hot, being judged by her Clanmates. She closed her eyes and breathed in the scents. She swiveled her ears when she heard a cat brush through the ferns, leaving the area.

Opening her mouth, she tasted the smells with her tongue.

Ashpelt, Woodpaw, Sunpaw, Brightblossom. "Beeflight," She meowed, without a moment's hesitation. She blinked and looked around. All the cats were present....except Beeflight!

"How did you know?" Brightblossom asked.

"Beeflight's scent went a bit to the left, while everyone else's stayed put." She responded. Brightblossom calmly congratulated her, but her face gave away her surprise and joy. Her apprentice got it right the fastest!

This exercise continued for a while, gradually getting harder. Two cats would leave, and then three cats. When it lost it's sense of challenge, both groups merged. Willowpaw did the best of all, only messing up twice. It was obvious that she had natural talent.

Once the sun had begun its descent back to the horizon, the cats started heading back to camp. "You did brilliant, Willowpaw! How did you do that? Don't tell me you cheated!" Frostpaw exclaimed, catching up to her friend.

Willowpaw lowered her head. "I guess I just got lucky," she mewed humbly.

"Aww, come on! You have a knack for it! Hopefully I'll do great in battle training!" Frostpaw said.

Brightblossom gave a mrrow of amusement. "Well, you will have to wait a bit longer, Frostpaw. For the next few sunrises we'll be working on scents and then hunting skills."

Frostpaw dragged her tail in the grass. "Not fair..." She muttered.

When they emerged back through the camp enterance, Pondpaw strode up to Frostpaw and Willowpaw. "Hey, how's warrior training going?" She asked.

Pondpaw already smelled like herbs, and bits of leaves clung to her fur. "Good," They both responded.

Frostpaw nudged her sister. "And medicine cat training?"

Pondpaw gave her fur a lick. "There's so much to remember!"

Fawndapple shouldered her way out of the medicine den. When she spotted Pondpaw, she called, "what does marigold do?"

Pondpaw thought for a moment, and then meowed, "helps wounds with infection?" Fawndapple gave a nod and made her way to the fresh-kill pile. "See?" Pondpaw insisted.

The three cats told each other what they had done that day, while Driftbreeze called together a hunting patrol, leading them out.

Brightblossom padded up to Willowpaw. "Tomorrow, be ready at dawn. You and I are going to practice scenting prey."

She turned to leave but Willowpaw asked, "Will Frostpaw be there?"

Brightblossom shook her head. "You two won't be able to do everything together."

At the sight of their drooping tails, Brightblossom added "I can talk to Ashpelt and see if we can learn how to hunt together."

They perked up at that . "Thank you!" They chimed. Brightblossom curled the tip of her tail, going to the fresh-kill pile.

"Do you want to share a meal?" Frostpaw asked. They headed over and snatched a mouse from the top of the heap.

As they chewed on the rodent, the dawn patrol returned. They were extremely late- it was sundown. Scarletfang, Sootclaw and Fadedleaf looked worried, their eyes wide. Fadedleaf's light brown fur was spiked more than the other cats'. She was usually fearful, but this time she seemed like she had just wrangled a fox. Scarletfang led them up the rockpile, calling softly to her leader. A moment later they nosed through the bracken into his den. The whole Clan quieted their conversations, trying to catch snippets what the patrol was saying.

"What do you think happened?" Frostpaw whispered, spraying bits

of food everywhere.

Willowpaw flicked her ears crossly, but said, "I don't know; they don't look wounded though. Maybe they got lost?" She tried to joke around- it did not lighten the mood as she had hoped, though.

Meanwhile, Hollyheart and Fernbelly were sharing tongues in a patch of sunlight. Despite being several moons since the deaths of two of her kits, she was still depressed. She had vowed never to have kits again, which was a shame because of the fact that she was a natural mother. Fernbelly spotted the three apprentices and bounded over. Hollyheart followed at a slower pace.

Fernbelly rasped her tongue over Pondpaw and Frostpaw's heads. Hollyheart nuzzled Willowpaw. "How was my kit's first day of training?" She purred. Hollyheart spoke to her kits about their day as well, drowning them in loving purrs. Frostpaw and Pondpaw wriggled to get away from their mother. Willowpaw resisted copying her friends- *her* mother still was hurting, so she let Hollyheart shower her with affection.

"Mother, I am an apprentice now." She gently reminded her.

Hollyheart pulled away, stopping herself from embarrassing Willowpaw even more. "So how was training, my *apprentice*?" She tried again, unsuccessfully keeping the pride from shining through.

"It was fantastic! We practiced identifying scents." She lowered her voice. "I did the best!"

Hollyheart's eyes glowed. "You're a special cat, Willowpaw. I see you doing great things." She gave her daughter a lick. Willowpaw spotted the dawn patrol come out of Badgerstar's den. The leader followed them out.

"Volefur, Foxtooth, Larksong." He called. The senior warriors joined Badgerstar and the dawn patrol, talking low. Hollyheart nuzzled Willowpaw one last time, then padded away.

Willowpaw, trying to act nonchalant, made her way to the apprentice's den- which was across from where Badgerstar was

discussing with his warriors. She laid in a spot of sunshine and closed her eyes. She pointed her ears towards them and listened.

"....Where did you see this?" Badgerstar asked.

Scarletfang responded, "Over by the ShadowClan border. Fadedleaf almost got caught."

Badgerstar sighed. "Do you know how to...make it useless? Disable it?"

Scarletfang shook her head. "No. I think these traps were meant for cats, though. Twoleg food is inside."

Willowpaw's eyes flew open. *Traps!*

"What are you looking so surprised about?" Frostpaw mewed. Willowpaw hissed at her to be quiet, and angled her ears towards Badgerstar.

"Eavesdropping again? Hmmph" But Frostpaw sat beside her friend. Willowpaw caught parts of talk- they had lowered their meows to bare whispers.

"Will we tell everyone..."

"Not until we can disable..."

"What if...killed in the trap?"

"We...careful...don't take chances."

Willowpaw watched the cats debate, when the finally they came to a conclusion, nodding all around.

When the sun started to turn the sky into a fiery red, Driftbreeze's hunting patrol returned. Badgerstar was pacing anxiously, and at their arrival, leaped over to Rockpile.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath Rockpile for a Clan meeting!" He yowled. The apprentices were the first there, eager to hear the newest threat to their Clan. Maybe

they could fight a fox!

The rest of the cats exchanged curious looks - all except for Willowpaw. The remaining warriors gathered, faces solemn. Hollyheart and Greeneyes sat next to each other towards the back. Fernbelly and Sootclaw joined the Clan after a nuzzle. Scarletfang, Fadedleaf and Oakfur took their place beside Driftbreeze, which aroused some comments. Shimmerpelt and Raggedclaw poked their heads out from the elder's den, grumbling. Fawndapple softly made her way to where Driftbreeze sat.

"Clanmates, I have called you together because the dawn patrol has found something most disturbing." Badgerstar motioned for Scarletfang to speak.

The reddish she-cat stood."While we were patrolling the ShadowClan border, Fadedleaf almost stumbled into a twoleg trap."

Gasps spread throughout the assembled cats.

"It was a shiny cage, and it had kittypet food inside. We believe that it is intended to trap cats." More gasps. Several cats hissed. "We do not know how to disable them, so be careful where you put your paws."

Badgerstar stepped forward. "That's right. For now on, no cat may go alone into the forest. I don't want anyone to get hurt. And do not play with these traps. No one knows what they are capable of." With that, he dismissed the Clan with an anxious flick of his tail.

# Chapter 4 > > Gathering

[image]

The shining full moon cast its light upon ThunderClan, turning every cat's pelt to silver and illuminating their eyes with a ghostly glow.

Badgerstar ducked out of his den. "We're late!" He growled. "Pondpaw, Frostpaw, Willowpaw, Sunpaw," he waved his tail for them to come. "Oakfur, Brightblossom, Ashpelt, Beeflight, Fadedleaf, and Scarletfang." The cats he had called stopped what they were doing and joined their leader in the center of the camp.

Driftbreeze and Fawndapple joined the ensemble. Being medicine cat and deputy, they always attended the Gatherings. Badgerstar hardly waited for the cats to gather before leading them out in a rush.

"Aren't you excited? Our first Gathering!" Willowpaw mewed as she caught up to the group.

Frostpaw gave an excited bounce. "There'll be so many cats..." she trailed off, attempting to imagine the sheer number.

"Hollyheart and Foxtooth! Join us!" Badgerstar added, calling over his shoulder.

They set a fast pace. Briskly, the cats trotted through the dense undergrowth, not bothering to enjoy the chilly night air. It wasn't long before they emerged at the lakeside. Water lapped lazily at the shore, washing over the dirt and scant pebbles. The group kept close to the water- three tail-lengths in fact, as not to get into trouble with WindClan.

After some time of trotting, Badgerstar called back, "Watch your paws!"

Willowpaw peered ahead. She could hear the soft gurgle of the

stream that separated WindClan and ThunderClan. As it fell into her view, she could see the small pebbles that edged it. They were smooth from seasons of swirling waters. She quietly wondered how many times those pebbles had seen Clan cats. *Maybe they have seen Firestar!* Her pelt tingled at the thought. Meanwhile, the cats in front of her easily leaped over the narrow stream. Yet, when it came time for Willowpaw to cross, she teetered on tips of her paws before jumping. "Eek!" she mewed, launching herself across. Her hind paws landed in the icy water, and she hissed, scrambling out.

Frostpaw twitched her whiskers in humor at the stumble. She was next to cross, but Willowpaw could tell from her growls that she was having problems as well.

Frostpaw slunk up beside Willowpaw. "Curse that water!" She hissed, shaking each leg out in turn.

Brightblossom slowed her pace to pad next to Willowpaw and Frostpaw. "Next time, try not to look down. Use your hind paws to really spring, too." She suggested, amusement shining in her eyes.

"Thanks!" Willowpaw and Frostpaw mewed. Willowpaw could visualize herself soaring over it, like an eagle, coming back from the Gathering. She would show that mouse-brained stream!

The group of cats began to run when they noticed that the moon was rising ever higher.

"So that's where the Clans gather," Frostpaw breathed, staring out at the island. It stood out as merely a shadow against the starry night sky. Willowpaw could almost see the island pulsing with the lives of all the cats that were there.

She couldn't help but run just a bit faster.

They passed the rolling hills of WindClan territory and the big Twoleg den. Underpaw, the ground grew soft and moist. The long reeds and grasses that bordered the lakeshore grew in number and swayed gently in a soft breeze. The air tickled Willowpaw's nose, bringing with it the scents of many other cats. Up ahead, Badgerstar slowed as he reached a huge fallen tree trunk that connected the

island to the rest of the territory.

"Wow," Willowpaw mewed. The trunk was ancient, by the looks of it. The wood was smooth and worn from seasons of cats crossing it.

Fadedleaf cast her eyes over the apprentices. "Legend has it," She murmured, "that StarClan made this tree fall upon a cat that tried to overthrow the WindClan leader!" The apprentices' eyes widened and they exchanged an incredulous glance.

"Who was the cat?" Frostpaw asked.

Fadedleaf mrrrowed. "Oh, I do not know. I doubt anyone does; that happened so long ago that not even our elder's elders can remember!" She turned back to the trunk, for it was her turn to cross.

"Careful, it's slippery," She warned, as she lightly leaped on and trotted across.

Willowpaw watched how her Clanmates dug their claws into the trunk to keep their balance, and how they used their tails to steady themselves. Only the experienced warriors had sheathed paws.

When it was her turn to go, Willowpaw had to get a nudge from her mentor to scramble up on the fallen tree because of her tiny, slender frame. Whereas, Frostpaw had an easier time, courtesy of her height.

Willowpaw forced herself not look down at the cold, dark water, lapping only tail-lengths below her- but she could hear it. She kept her eyes focused on the cat in front of her: Sunpaw. He moved confidently, but she could see his claws digging into the wood, in fact he had to wriggle them out with each step. At last, Sunpaw sheathed his paws and leapt down. She copied him, careful not to embarrass herself by slipping up.

Excitement returned, fizzing and bubbling inside her. *My first Gathering!* She rejoiced. Opening her mouth, she could taste the cat-scents, even stronger now that they were so close. She followed the rest of ThunderClan as they pushed through the undergrowth, and

then looked around.

Cats. All Willowpaw could see was all kinds of different cats. Orange pelts, brown, black, white, gray, speckled, striped, spotted and everything in between. Some cats didn't have tails and some were missing a leg or ear.

The different smells threatened to choke her. There was a pine sap scent mixed with musk that lay strong in the air. There was one that was marshy, interlaced with fish. And there was a scent that brought images of heather, rabbits, and wide open fields. ShadowClan, RiverClan and WindClan.

And Willowpaw could tell who belonged to each Clan.

The WindClan warriors were lithe and had short, almost scruffy pelts, with long tails and limbs.

While RiverClan members had long glossy fur, were a bit plumper than the others, and reeked of fish.

And ShadowClan wore dark expressions, also for the most part, had darker pelted cats.

Of course, there were the ones that played the outliers. The unidentifiable warriors, who after mingling and such, Willowpaw was sure that she could be able to place them.

She wondered how the other Clans must see ThunderClan. *Probably as the strongest, bravest, smartest cats in the forest!* She reasoned with pride.

But then, her attention was drawn to the tension that was rising between ThunderClan and the rest. All the cats were turned towards them and glaring.

Frogstar of ShadowClan growled, "And where have you been, sleeping in? We were about to start, regardless of your presence."

Willowpaw was taken aback by the leader's lack of respect for Badgerstar. She also felt uncomfortable under Frogstar's cold yellow eyes.

Frostpaw leaned in next to Willowpaw's ear. "Does he ever groom himself?" She whispered. It was true, Frogstar's dirty gray pelt looked matted, and bits of dirt were abundant.

Otterstar of RiverClan assumed the expression that he couldn't care less, while Runningstar of WindClan seemed poised to flee; his brown tabby pelt starting to rise.

The leaders shifted on the branches of the massive tree in the middle of the island. Deputies gathered at its knotty roots, and the medicine cats sat beside a holly bush, murmuring amongst each other.

"We apologize for any inconvience." Badgerstar replied coolly, dipping his head. The tension was fiercer than ever as he made his way through the parting crowd, nose held high. The silence that came with it was almost deafening. At last, he took his place on an oak branch, and Driftbreeze at the roots.

"Are we ready to begin?" Frogstar sneered, casting a cold glare at the ThunderClan leader.

Brightblossom padded by and waved her tail for the two apprentices to follow. "Normally, we have time to chat." She whispered, leading them to where the other ThunderClan cats were beginning to settle.

"Why would we want to talk with other Clans?" Frostpaw snorted.

Willowpaw swept her eyes over the warriors. *Imagine what stories they could tell! Battles and foxes and so much more!* "I think it would be interesting to get to know them..." She said.

Frostpaw fluffed out her fur, flexing her claws. "You're right! So we can use all their weaknesses against them!"

"That's not what I meant..." Willowpaw muttered.

"Hush now! The leaders are speaking," Brightblossom warned them.

The friends snapped their jaws shut, ear tips burning with embarrassment.

By now, everyone was staring at the Gathering Tree.

Otterstar rose to address first. "I suppose that I will begin. Fish are swimming well in RiverClan. I believe that we are prepared for the coming leaf-bare. We also have a new apprentice, Crabpaw!"

"Crabpaw! Crabpaw!" The Clans called. A hefty young tom with jet black fur bathed in the attention.

*Show off.* Willowpaw rolled her eyes.

Otterstar sat back down after the cheering died away, eyes gleaming for Crabpaw.

Badgerstar was preparing to stand, but Frogstar shot up first. "Prey is runs well for us. Although, I personally picked up ThunderClan scent on our side of the border..." he swept his gooey yellow gaze around, it finally landing on Badgerstar.

The ThunderClan leader stiffened. "You must have been mistaken. Perhaps the wind carried scent over, but let me reassure you that none of my warriors have crossed the border." He said through gritted teeth. Frogstar dipped his head mockingly.

"How obnoxious!" Willowpaw hissed to Frostpaw. She nodded in agreement and lashed her tail.

"I would just love to whack him on that bee-brained head of his!"

Badgerstar was on his paws before Frogstar had sat. "We are experiencing good hunting. But half a moon ago, Scarletfang," he nodded to the she-cat. "Found a twoleg trap. It is unclear to us how to disable it; therefore we will take extra precautions to avoid them."

The Clans turned to each other and murmured, eyes wide and flashing with fear. Badgerstar raised his tail for silence. "We bring good news as well. Three new apprentices have been welcomed. Willowpaw, Pondpaw and Frostpaw!"

"Pondpaw, Willowpaw, Frostpaw!" Everyone cheered.

Willowpaw glowed in the sound of her apprentice name being spoken from each Clan.

Once the commotion faded, Badgerstar let Runningstar proceed.

Willowpaw noticed that the WindClan leader's eyes constantly darted around, as if a hidden enemy lurked in the shadows.

"WindClan is doing well. We have new warriors to celebrate. Hawkwing and Sparrowpelt!" Everybody cheered once again. Runningstar sat down quickly, flicking his tail and swiveling his ears.

"Look!" Frostpaw whispered, pointing her ears at a sleek pelted tom with a stubby tail.

"He looks like a RiverClan, maybe. Hey, what's up with his tail?" Willowpaw wrinkled her nose. The bob-tailed cat was talking with who looked like his mate, judging by their closely held heads.

Sunpaw padded past Frostpaw and Willowpaw, slowing down. Frostpaw stopped him with her tail. "Do you know who Stubby-Tail is?" She asked, nodding toward the cat.

Sunpaw glanced over his shoulder and smirked. "Yeah. That's Pebbletail of RiverClan."

Frostpaw snorted. "That name suits him. Did a badger eat it off?"

"No, he was born like that." Sunpaw said, and padded away.

"That went by quicker than I expected," Willowpaw said.

"Yeah, but did you see the look on Frogstar's face when Badgerstar defended ThunderClan like that?" Frostpaw recalled. "I think that Badgerstar could beat Frogstar's tail in a battle!" She mused.

Willowpaw nodded. "How did that mangy old grump even become leader? He's so--"

"Are you going to sit and chat like elders all night?" Ashpelt interrupted, walking over.

The two apprentices realized that they were some of the last few. "Oops." Willowpaw squeaked. They followed Ashpelt out of the clearing and to the tree bridge.

Ashpelt glanced back. "And by the way, watch what you say at a Gathering. You never know who is listening..."

# Chapter 5 >> Battle Training

[image]

"Today we will be practicing battle moves," Ashpelt announced, sweeping his sharp yellow gaze across the assembled cats.

Frostpaw puffed out her fur in excitement. "Finally!" She yowled, kneading the grass with her claws.

The gray warrior lashed his tail crossly. "Learn when to listen and when to speak, Frostpaw." He growled.

She lowered her head in embarrassment. Willowpaw laid her tail across her friend's back to comfort her.

"Now," he continued, "we'll learn some basic fighting techniques. Lets begin with defense; because, as I am sure you have heard before, the best defense is a good offense. It is also helpful in a situation where you are overpowered."

Frostpaw gave a bounce. "Like a fox fight!"

Ashpelt flicked his ears. "I fought off one of those single-pawed." He boasted.

Willowpaw resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

"Anyway," Brightblossom interrupted, "Ashpelt, would you help me demonstrate a few moves?"

Ashpelt nodded. "Watch closely." He meowed.

Brightblossom bent into a hunting crouch, and then lowered herself even closer to the ground, digging her paws into the leaf mold. "During battle, stay low; it makes it harder for your opponent to uproot you." With a nod toward Ashpelt, she added, "but sometimes you will be caught by surprise- or strength."

Frostpaw watched, entranced, as Ashpelt slammed into

Brightblossom, bowling her over while Willowpaw cringed. Ashpelt pinned her down, but the white warrior raked her sheathed hind paws down Ashpelt's vulnerable underbelly. He let her go and stepped away.

"You see? Raking your enemy's belly like that is a surefire way to put yourself back in control, or at least give you enough time to make a speedy getaway." She gave her paw a quick lick before beckoning to Willowpaw with a nod. "Let's start with you."

Willowpaw hesitated, then padded unconfidently to the center of the hollow. Her pelt tingled with self-consciousness despite the only audience being her best friend and her mentor. To add to the discomfort, the sun's rays shone right into her eyes, nearly blinding her.

"Wait just a heartbeat. I didn't think I needed to teach you, but the first lesson to winning a battle is to believe that you can. There's no reason *not* to be confident. After all, you've got the best mentor in all the Clans!" Brightblossom meowed, mocking Ashpelt's braggart tone. The tom snapped his glare onto her, flattening his ears. "Lighten up, you old lump! I was just teasing." She said, nudging him with a paw.

Willowpaw couldn't help a purr as it rose in her throat.

Brightblossom spun around to face her apprentice. "There! That's the mindset you need when fighting. Be at ease, but not too relaxed. When you keep at it, you'll find your own rhythm. Alright, now try the belly rake on me." She said.

"Okay," Willowpaw mewed. No sooner had the words left her mouth; Brightblossom rammed into her side, slamming her into the ground, all while driving the air from her lungs. Panic took over and she flailed her paws wildly.

Brightblossom let Willowpaw stand. "Not quite. You need to be quick, or else you could really get hurt."

"Sorry," She muttered, catching her breath. It didn't help the situation that Frostpaw was stifling a purr.

"Don't be sorry, just react faster next time. Again."

The two cats resumed their positions. She darted at Willowpaw, quick as a snake. The apprentice reared up on her hindpaws, swatting at her mentor. Yet, Brightblossom dodged it with ease and landed an unbalancing blow to her exposed underbelly.

"Arg!" Willowpaw spat, folding her ears against her head.

"Its fine, you were doing good. Remember to protect your stomach though. If you see a cat going low for you, stay close to the ground. Think of a badger; they are so low that it's nearly impossible to flip them over." Brightblossom offered.

Willowpaw nodded, although inwardly she heaved a long sigh. This time, she kept the advice in mind as Brightblossom charged towards her. She kept herself close to the leaf-covered floor, feeling the dew between her toes. Her mentor flashed out a paw, and Willowpaw hopped back. She bared her fangs in an involuntary snarl.

"Much better!" Brightblossom meowed, standing up and shaking out her pretty white fur. "Did you notice how my back was against the sun? When fighting, even the little things like that can turn the tides in your favor."

"Yeah, I was half blind the entire time!" Willowpaw mrrowed.

"Now Frostpaw, we shall practice that." Ashpelt said, switching places with Brightblossom and Willowpaw.

Willowpaw sat down under the shade of an oak beside her mentor and trained her eyes upon Frostpaw. *I hope she does well, after all her excitement about being able to start battle training.* She thought to herself.

Ashpelt gave Frostpaw instructions and a few tips before beginning. For the first round, he bounded over to her, Willowpaw noticed, in a slightly clumsy manner. He swiped at his apprentice's stomach.

Frostpaw tried to jump back, but her paw caught in a tree root causing her to trip and fall.

Ashpelt stood, smirking. "Wow, I didn't even have to do anything. Once more."

While the two continued practicing, Willowpaw leaned over to her mentor. "Can we try it again?" She asked, determined to get it right.

Brightblossom nodded, leading her to a clear patch of ground where they could train.

As the day grew, the cats went over a variety of defensive moves. At last they ended with the mentors stepping aside to let the Frostpaw and Willowpaw try out a mock battle.

"Don't go too hard on each other, and don't forget that your claws are put away for this." Brightblossom reminded them.

"The loser has to fetch new moss for the elders!" Ashpelt added.

Brightblossom rolled her eyes in good humor.

"Hey, it adds competition," he defended.

Willowpaw sunk into a crouch and circled Frostpaw, feeling a wave of nervousness. Frostpaw was always the more aggressive one of the den.

"You're going down!" She joked.

Willowpaw flicked her ears in fake amusement.

Frostpaw then sped forward and batted at her friend's head. Willowpaw stumbled back, giving herself a quick shake. Before she could ready herself again, Frostpaw barreled towards her, ramming, then pinning Willowpaw to the ground.

Willopaw grunted as a stab of pain shot through her foot.

"Sorry," Frostpaw mumbled, loosening her grip.

Brightblossom was about to intervene when Ashpelt put a paw in front of her path. "Leave them be. They must learn these skills someday."

Her protest fell silent as she watched Willowpaw spring up, knocking Frostpaw back.

Taking advantage of the surprise attack, she looked around for anything that could help her end this battle.

The same tree whose roots had made Frostpaw slip up earlier seemed like the perfect opportunity. She sped as fast as she could to its base.

"What is she doing? Running away wasn't part of what you taught her," Ashpelt muttered to Brightblossom. She narrowed her eyes in confusion.

Frostpaw had shaken herself off and began a hot pursuit after Willowpaw.

But Willowpaw was ready. She scrambled halfway up the tree's trunk and then leaped back down- right on top of Frostpaw. She squealed and tried to tried to run away, only to be flattened by the gray tabby.

The mentors raced over to the apprentices. "That was not in training!" Ashpelt protested, helping the cats get untangled. He looked over at Brightblossom pointedly, wishing her to scold Willowpaw.

Despite her eyes gleaming with amusement, she said, "Willowpaw even though you won, that was not in the rules."

Ashpelt continued to stare, so Brightblossom reluctantly added, "And because of that you *and* Frostpaw get to bring clean bedding to -" She broke off as her eyes found Willowpaw's paw raised slightly off the ground.

"Did you get a thorn?" She asked.

Willowpaw lifted her paw for inspection. A dark brown speck was buried deep in her pad, framed by several scarlet beads of blood. One of them dripped onto the ground, staining part of a yellow leaf burgundy.

"Oh, I didn't know that was there!" Willowpaw mewed.

"Head straight for the medicine den when we get back to camp. We don't want that getting infected." Brightblossom said.

Meanwhile, Ashpelt shot a glance at the sky. "We should begin heading back now; sundown is approaching." He waved his tail for the cats to come.

Brightblossom twitched her whiskers in annoyance at his cocky behavior but followed without a sharp remark.

Willowpaw trailed behind her mentor, each step sending a needle of pain up her leg.

Frostpaw padded up to her friend. Neither of the two spoke, only kept their gaze focused ahead.

Brightblossom fell behind to privately praise Willowpaw. "That was very clever, nice job. Next time follow the rules though."

She glowed on the inside from the compliment, but responded by calmly dipping her head. "Thank you, and I will." Brightblossom pulled back ahead.

"Sorry," Willowpaw said after some time. From the corner of her vision, she snuck a glance at Frostpaw.

But her friend didn't look vexed, in fact, she broke out into a purr. "Its fine I guess. Besides, I'm not even sure what happened. It was all a blur. How did you end up squashing me?" She tilted her head in confusion.

Willowpaw's ears burned. "Well... I um, sort of climbed a tree and jumped down."

Frostpaw halted in her tracks. "No way! That's brilliant!" She mewed. "I'll have to remember that for when I'm fighting ShadowClan!" She dropped into the hunter's crouch and growled at an imaginary enemy. Slipping through the underbrush, she pretended to dodge swipes. Though her form was clumsy, making fronds sway and squirrels scamper back into their nests.

"Some sneak-master you are! All the prey in ThunderClan territory must have been scared away by now!" Willowpaw teased.

"You try, then!" Frostpaw retorted.

Willowpaw copied her, but modified it to where she was moving smoothly between overgrown bushes. She gasped as her pressure was placed on her injured paw, and a lancing sting crawled up her leg. "Ow!" She cried.

Frostpaw was by her side in an instant, offering her shoulder for support.

Brightblossom looked back from her place up ahead, shaking her head in a joking manner. "Great StarClan, its only a thorn, Willowpaw. Just wait until you have to go to battle and get a real injury!" She mused.

Willowpaw's tail drooped at the thought of more pain than what that thorn was causing.

Ashpelt and Brightblossom sped their pace until the apprentices lost sight of them.

"Don't worry; we are almost at camp anyway. I'm sure Fawndapple will fix you right up." Frostpaw mewed.

Suddenly, a screech sounded from up ahead, making Frostpaw and Willowpaw freeze.

Willowpaw opened her jaws to taste the air. *Please no foxes or badgers!* She pleaded silently. All the scents smelled ordinary as ever.

"Frostpaw, Willowpaw!" They heard Ashpelt yowl. "Go get Badgerstar!"

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*What a nice cliffhanger, right? I know it took me forever to post this, but I found some inspiration, so new chapters are going to be coming more often- especially since summer is right around the corner. Thank you to*
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*everyone that waited this long ! .*

# Chapter 6 > > Traps

[image]

***((The trap is somewhere between the two shown in the media))***

*"Frostpaw, Willowpaw! Go get Badgerstar!"*

The apprentices exchanged a frightened glance. Willowpaw was the first to charge back to camp, thorn in paw forgotten. Frostpaw was right behind her.

Their gait was clumsy and instinctive; tendrils of undergrowth snagged at them and threatened the mission.

Yet, it was Frostpaw who burst through the tunnel first. "Badgerstar! Badgerstar!" She yowled.

Their Clanmates looked up sharply from their activities, eyes wide. The black and white leader quickly emerged from his den and met the two apprentices by the entrance. Although he was startled, his demeanor was calm and collected. "Whats the matter?" He demanded, surveying them.

Willowpaw waved her tail wildly at the forest. "Brightblossom and Ashpelt!"

Badgerstar's expression hardened as he turned to the now growing crowd of cats. Scanning them, he called out the warriors he needed. "Scarletfang, Foxtooth!" With iron fortitude, he beckoned the two with his tail, and bolted out of camp.

Once they had left and the cluster of cats had thinned, Frostpaw faced the tunnel. Willowpaw felt a prick of dismay as she saw her friend's face. "I'd know that look anywhere. You're not thinking of following them, are you?" She asked, slinking up.

"Of course I am! I can't let them have all the fun!" Her eyes sparkled with excitement.

"I don't want to get in trouble though. Besides, we don't know whats going on! For StarClan's sake, it could be a badger!" Willowpaw pointed out, curling her claws into the ground.

Frostpaw only shook her head, for she was distracted by the rush of adrenaline that was coursing through her blood. "Your choice whether or not to come." With that, she shot out of camp.

Willowpaw hesitated. She wasn't sure whether to stay, and miss the possible adventure, or to go and risk being in trouble...or worse, if there happened to be a fox or badger lingering about. Cursing Frostpaw under her breath, she darted after her friend.

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The trail of fear scent was more than enough help as to where Badgerstar had gone. It wafted through the trees, sharp and tart. Willowpaw caught up to Frostpaw, who had slowed her pace to a brisk trot.

"I knew you'd come along." Her friend snickered.

"It's better than letting you have boasting rights when this is all over," Willowpaw retorted. She opened her mouth again to point out the stupidity of this idea when Frostpaw's tail silenced her.

"Listen," she whispered, turning her bright blue eyes on her.

For a moment, the only sound was their breathing and distant bird song. Then a wail split the air, giving the apprentices a start. The fur along Willowpaw's spine began to stand.

Frostpaw looked back excitedly. "We're getting close!" She mewed.

Willowpaw glared at her in exasperation, forcing her fur to lie flat. "This isn't an adventure, Frostpaw. This is a real situation!"

The white and ginger apprentice only rolled her eyes and continued walking. "Whatever."

Up ahead, they spotted movement through the undergrowth, making them quicken their pace.
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They shouldered through, and onto a shocking scene.

"Hold still, Brightblossom!" Badgerstar grunted, then turned to his assembled warriors.

As the apprentices' eyes swept the spectacle, they gave a bewildered gasp; which caught the attention of the warriors.

"What are you two doing here?" Foxtooth growled.

Willowpaw's mouth struggled to form words in their defense.

"Get back to camp. This is no place for an apprentice." Foxtooth turned his attention back to Brightblossom, who was clenching her teeth to keep from wailing once again.

It was then that Willowpaw could make sense of what was happening. Brightblossom was caught in a trap.

Her mentor's paw was stuck between a pair of shiny jagged jaws. Blood matted her white fur, the contrast being as clear as day and night. Willowpaw's stomach heaved uneasily as she saw glimpses of bone through the wound.

"We can help!" Frostpaw protested, lashing her tail.

Badgerstar was about to speak when Brightblossom spat, "somebody just get me out of here!"

Scarletfang, who had remained silent, ignored the apprentices and crouched to inspect the trap. "There must be some way to open the jaws," she muttered.

"Don't get in the way," Badgerstar said over his shoulder as he padded to join the red warrior

Frostpaw confidently strode after her leader, while Willowpaw followed more slowly.

Meanwhile, the cats examined the trap and tossed around theories.

Badgerstar straightened as his eyes burned with an idea. He glanced

around before ordering, "Find two sticks thin enough to go between the jaw's gap but sturdy enough not to snap."

Willowpaw shot a puzzled look at her friend, but Frostpaw was already nodding excitedly. The warriors dispersed as they began to quickly search for sticks. Willowpaw began to prod around the base of a nearby oak, while Frostpaw nosed through piles of fallen leaves. She tried to ignore Brightblossom's bit back whimpers unsuccessfully.

Frostpaw pulled a small branch, with shriveled leaves still attached, out and called "I got one!"

Badgerstar looked behind his back. "Good. We now only need one more."

It was no more than a moment later when Ashpelt dragged a mouthful of twigs out from underneath an elder bush. "Found some." He said proudly, dropping the bundle beside Frostpaw's single stick.

Badgerstar nodded in acknowledgement and bounded back to Brightblossom. "Foxtooth, find the sturdiest stick you can," he said, taking one as well.

Foxtooth grasped one in his mouth and met his leader by the trap. Putting down his stick to speak, Badgerstar said, "I will place this stick in the trap's jaws and push it. You will do the same, only you heave it the other direction. If it all goes accordingly, we can pry it open enough for Brightblossom to pull her paw out. " Foxtooth and Brightblossom nodded.

The rest of the cats stepped away to give them their space, all while watching nervously.

The two toms placed their stick on either end of the trap, finding a gap large enough. When they were in place Badgerstar gave the signal. Both cats pushed and heaved with all of their might. Their claws scored the ground and muscles rippled with effort.

Slowly, the trap lessened its grip until Brightblossom was able to

yank her paw out.

Scarletfang dashed over to lend support for the injured warrior. All the activity sent more blood streaming down her leg. Willowpaw admired Brightblossom's determination not to look down at her mangled paw.

"Get back to camp." Ashpelt told Frostpaw and Willowpaw. Willowpaw was more than relieved to turn tail and rush back.

As she was heading back to camp, a dark question crossed her mind. *Why would twolegs want to capture and trap cats?*

But it was a dull throbbing that brought her back to her current, and less life-threatening situation. One in which a thorn was embedded even deeper now in her paw pad. Pausing to examine her foot, she cringed as she saw specks of dry blood caking the pad, layered with dirt and leaf bits. She held sympathy for Fawndapple, who would soon have the unfortunate task of cleaning it off.

She limped into camp and headed straight for the medicine den where Fawndapple was waiting anxiously.

She rose when she saw Willowpaw's gait and did a quick scan of her. "What was the commotion for?" she mewed, eyes round with worry.

"Brightblosom got her paw in a trap..." Willowpaw responded, suddenly feeling silly for limping just because of a thorn. "...and I've got a thorn in mine."

Fawndapple swiveled her ears to point to the den. "Pondpaw will help you." She said, not taking her gaze off the camp entrance.

Willowpaw proceeded to go inside and found Pondpaw organizing the herb storages. As she caught sight of Willowpaw, she darted up. "What's the problem?" She asked, sniffing Willowpaw all over.

"Thorn," she replied, raising her paw for inspection.

Pondpaw cringed when she saw its current condition. "You should have come right away. It looks as if you've been to Moonpool and

back, from all the dirt in there!" She exclaimed.

Willowpaw's ear tips grew warm with embarrassment. She sat down and Pondpaw began to lick away the grit.

"Fawndapple!" A panicked cry sounded from camp. "Brightblossom is injured!" Willowpaw watched as Ashpelt and Scarletfang helped her hobble over.

Pondpaw twitched her whiskers in apprehension. "Poor Brightblossom! Those traps are awful; I hope we can find a way to disable them." She shifted her paws self-consciously before adding, "er, this is my first time pulling out a thorn without Fawndapple's help. So you might want to bite down on something."

Willowpaw shook her head, casting a glance at her mentor. "I'll be fine."

Fawndapple rushed past and retrieved some herbs from the storage. "Did you dry the oak leaves I collected earlier?" She asked briskly.

"Yes, they should be next to the burdock" Pondpaw responded.

Fawndapple wrinkled her nose. "No wonder I couldn't find them; they're normally by the marigold." She collected her bundle of herbs and rushed out.

"Sorry," Pondpaw called.

Willowpaw snorted, amused. "Having fun?"

"Well, it's satisfying. Lots to remember; the details is where it counts." She batted a ball of moss over. "Just in case,"

Willowpaw took the wad between her teeth, trying not to swallow the tendrils that tickled her mouth.

"Ow!" She yelped as Pondpaw accidentally nipped her pad.

"Sorry," Pondpaw said again.

After several more clumsy attempts, the offending thorn was

removed. Pondpaw gave her a poppy seed for the pain, along with another apology. Willowpaw thanked her and headed out.

On her way, she saw Fawndapple applying poultice to her mentor's foot.

"I will be able to use my paw again, right?" Brightblossom asked in a low voice.

Fawndapple nodded, but a faint shadow crossed her eyes.

"Hey, how's your war-wound feeling?" Willowpaw gave a small jolt in surprise as Frostpaw jumped out in front of her.

"I think I'll live," she smirked.

Frostpaw dropped the mouse she was carrying in a patch of warm sunshine by the medicine den as to pick up the latest update, should there be one.

"Aren't you a nosy one?" Willowpaw teased.

"Look who's talking!" Frostpaw retorted, swiping at her.

The two bent down to share the mouse after the eventful day.

"When you left, I stayed behind to check out the trap." Frostpaw whispered between bites.

Willowpaw gave her a confused look. "Why would you do that? Don't tell me it's another one of your crazy ideas."

"If you want to call it that. I was trying to see if there would be a way to disable similar traps." Frostpaw replied, swiping her tongue across her mouth.

"...and is there?" Willowpaw prompted.

Frostpaw shrugged. "I didn't really see how, unless we do what we did today with every single one in the forest...and I don't believe we have enough clanmates to sacrifice for that!"

Willowpaw's hackles raised. "You aim to think there's more?"

"Well if there's one, there *must* be more."

Willowpaw felt her appetite vanish. She imagined traps hiding under every leaf pile and beneath each shadow.

The two looked up as Sunpaw and his brother, Woodpaw approached, their tails raised excitedly. "What happened? Ashpelt won't tell me." He asked.

"Brightblossom got her paw stuck in a trap." Willowpaw informed them.

Woodpaw tilted his head in confusion. "She tried to get kittypet food?"

This time, it was Frostpaw who answered. "No, this was a different kind of trap. It was hidden, and had teeth that bit her and wouldn't let go!"

Sunpaw and Woodpaw exchanged a surprised look. "How did you get her out?" He asked.

Frostpaw then launched into her story, which was slightly exaggerated from what really went down.

It wasn't long before every cat in the Clan had heard a thing or two about the incident, and demanded solutions. And once again, Badgerstar assumed his position atop the Highledge to address the Clan.

The call for the clanmates to gather was unnecessary, for the entire clan was already congregated at its base.

"As all of you know, Brightblossom stumbled into a trap today."

An outbreak of worried murmurs arose. The leader lifted his tail for silence before continuing.

"It was not the cage that was previously encountered, but a pair of jaws that was hidden well. It clamped down on her paw, and if it

wasn't for the help of our brave warriors, things could have been much worse."

The warriors that assisted in the rescue straightened and puffed out their chests.

"Yet we will not live like mice in our own home! There must be a way to disable these traps but until then, I order that every cat that ventures into the forest takes the utmost caution as to where he places his paws." Badgerstar finished.

The ThunderClan cats expressed their fear by kneading the ground and exchanging anxious looks.

Willowpaw stood from where she was sitting and padded to the apprentices' den.

Before she had reached it, though, her mother Hollyheart met her. "Scarletfang told me you were there! Are you all right?" She fretted.

Willowpaw shook out her pelt and nodded. "I'm fine,"

Hollyheart purred and nuzzled her daughter's cheek. "You stay away from those traps, hear me?"

Willowpaw nuzzled her back. "Got it."

Her mother mewed farewell and let Willowpaw continue to the den.

Bracken fronds graced her pelt as she padded inside and settled down in her cozy nest.

The traps invaded her thoughts again, making her long for peaceful sleep, no dreams preferably.

*What if there are too many traps?* She worried. *Will they trap all of ThunderClan? Or worse, will we have to find a new home?*

Anxiety was twisting her stomach into knots, causing her to make a late run to the medicine den to fetch a poppy seed, using the excuse of Frostpaw's poor skills causing her pain.

Once back in her den she felt more at ease, and at last, sleep greeted her with warm paws.

# Chapter 7 > > A Plan

[image]

Willowpaw woke the next morning with a paw poking her ribs. Dawn hadn't broken yet, therefore the camp was still shrouded in darkness.

She grumbled and feebly batted away the offending paw.

"Get up, lazy mouse!" She instantly recognized the demanding voice of Frostpaw.

"What do you want?" Willowpaw blinked slowly to clear the sleep from her eyes.

"Just get up. I'll explain in a moment,"

With a huge yawn, Willowpaw rose to her haunches and stretched. She noticed the bodies of her fellow apprentices rose and fell peacefully as they slept, oblivious to the disturbance. Frostpaw carefully stepped over them as she made her way out of the den. Willowpaw followed clumsily, sleepiness making her paws heavy and awkward. When she had almost reached the exit, her hind leg met with Woodpaw's face, jerking him into awareness.

"Already?" He mumbled, blearily squinting around the den for the culprit. His gaze landed on his brother, who he then proceeded to kick in the head before lowering his own and falling back asleep. Willowpaw darted out before any other cat could awaken.

"Great job, you nearly managed to wake up every cat in that den!" Frostpaw whispered.

Willowpaw lashed her tail in irritation. "Well, you're the one who made me get up before dawn like this! What did you expect?"

Frostpaw didn't respond. Instead she glanced around before scaling the hidden exit out of camp on the cliff face. "Follow me," she

hissed down.

Willowpaw didn't have to size up the height to know that there was no way that she was going to climb up there. Before she had the chance to open her mouth to protest to her friend, the sky caught her attention. It was just beginning to lighten with the first hints of dawn. It wouldn't be long until the sun rose, and dawn patrols would be forming.

All while cursing Frostpaw under her breath, she hobbled over the camp entrance, which was guarded by none other than Greeneyes. "Just my luck," she growled.

Greeneyes narrowed her eyes as the apprentice approached. "Um, dirtplace. Bad mouse," she lied. The warrior let her pass, but remained stiff with skepticism.

Willowpaw hurried to the dirtplace, and slipped under the bushes out into the forest once she was there.

"What took you so long?" Frostpaw hissed, her head poking out from behind a birch tree.

"Greeneyes the grump was guarding the camp. Besides, you know I hate climbing." Willowpaw mewed. "This better be an important reason for dragging me out of my nest before sunrise." She added, licking her ruffled fur flat.

Frostpaw twitched her whiskers in excitement. "I was thinking about those traps last night. I came up with an idea on how to disable them!"

Willowpaw's eyes shot to the size of saucers. Instantly, all her drowsiness left to be filled with disbelief. "Are you mousebrained? What if your idea doesn't work, and we end up trapped, or worse? We aren't supposed to be out here alone in the first place!" She began to churn the earth with her paws.

Frostpaw only shook her head and padded away. "You aren't alone, you've got me!" She paused, picking up a pebble between her jaws. Willowpaw sighed, and looked up at the ever-lightening sky.

Meanwhile, Frostpaw aimed before chucking the pebble at her friend. It hit her square on the shoulder, causing her to yelp and leap several fox-lengths in the air.

"And quit being such a fraidy-mouse!" Frostpaw snickered

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Willowpaw marveled the forest before dawn. The morning dew rested heavily upon each leaf and softened the grass. Several early birds sang their songs to awaken the creatures that still slept. A faint breeze carried with it the sweet smell of flowers that filled her nose.

She padded through a pair of arching ferns, noticing the tiny black seeds on the underside of each frond. The air seemed so much fresher at this time, so clean. It was as if this place existed in a different world.

"I don't think you're even looking," Frostpaw's accusing voice shattered the peace.

"I am!" Willowpaw objected, tossing over a pile of leaves for good measure.

Secretly, she was trying to distract herself from the task at hand. Just the thought of disobeying Badgerstar's direct orders made her jittery, much less actually doing it.

Now that her focus was brought back to finding a trap, every rustle, every chirp sent her heart pounding and a rake of guilt down her spine.

"Calm down, would you? You're jumpier than a squirrel," Frostpaw said.

Willowpaw took a deep breath. "Sorry. I guess I'm just a little nervous."

"A little!" Frostpaw huffed.

Willowpaw froze as she caught a whiff of her clanmates. "Frostpaw!
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There's cats nearby!" She looked around frantically for a place to hide, while Frostpaw raised her nose to the air.

"We're downwind, so they can't scent -Mousedung!" She cursed.

Before they had a chance to hide, three cats nearly ran into them.

"Frostpaw? Willowpaw?" Sunpaw was first to speak. The two crowds were glued to their spots as they surveyed the others warily. Beside the ginger tom, Woodpaw and Birdpaw shifted uncomfortably.

"What're you doing around here?" Frostpaw queried, tilting her head to one side.

"I could ask the same of you," Birdpaw retorted, but her eyes glittered with apprehension.

There was a lengthy pause in which both groups of secretive apprentices thought about what to do next.

At last Frostpaw said slowly, "we'll keep our mouth shut if you do."

Birdpaw gave a brisk nod and plunged into the forest, the other two apprentices right behind her.

Once they were gone, Wilowpaw asked, "what just went down?"

Frostpaw narrowed her eyes at the spot where the others had been standing. "They're up to something, that's what." She shook her head to clear it. "Now come on, let's keep looking."

Willowpaw continued her search by prodding at lumps under the undergrowth. *What could the other apprentices be up to?* She thought to herself. *Perhaps they are trying to solve this problem, too?* Although somehow, she doubted that.

The woods lightened as the sun slowly rose higher. The birds, now fully alert, stretched their wings before flying among the branches and letting out a chorus of song.

But Willowpaw was in no mood for their noise. The dawn patrols

would be leaving soon, and if they were caught, Badgerstar would have none of their heroic nonsense. Not unless it resulted to something other than trouble. *At least the elders would have clean pelts for a while!* Willowpaw sniffed.

Biting back a yawn, she pushed aside another pile of branches and leaves. A flash of silver suddenly caught her eye. Giving a yelp, she stumbled back, only to trip on her own paws in her rush to get away. Gruesome images of Brightblossom's accident flashed through her mind.

"Found one?" Frostpaw mewed, trotting over.

Willowpaw nodded and flicked her ears toward the trap.

"Brilliant! Let's see if my plan works," she glanced around. Finding a good sized rock, she rolled it over by the trap.

"You're not going to throw that at me, are you?" Willowpaw *mrrrowed.*

Frostpaw rolled her eyes. "Of course not. Anyway, I was looking at the trap that caught Brightblossom and I think I have an understanding of how one works. See that raised circle in the center? Well I bet you that when Brightblossom was walking, she stepped on it, making the jaws snap shut!" She quivered her whiskers in excitement.

"That's clever thinking! If you drop the rock on the shiny circle, it can't work anymore, and nobody gets hurt."

Frostpaw was practically glowing with pride. "Maybe I'll become a warrior sooner for thinking this up!" She said loftily.

"Don't forget who helped you, beebrain!" Willowpaw added, swatting at Frostpaw's ears.

Frostpaw ducked just in time and kicked out her paws out from underneath her. "As I was saying, warrior here I come!" She picked up the rock between her chin and chest, positioning it right over the trap's gaping jaws, then dropping it.

Lightning quick, it snapped shut with a sharp *clang!*

Willowpaw and Frostpaw gave a yowl of excitement. "I - We did it! I can't wait to tell Badgerstar!" Frostpaw exclaimed.

Willowpaw felt like a tree was lifted off of her at the relief of this plan working out. "Two apprentices solved all of ThunderClan's problems!" She announced, strutting around the disabled trap and holding her tail as straight as a tail could be held.

"He's going to talk about how great we are at the Gathering!" Frostpaw realized, bouncing on her paws.

Willowpaw beckoned for her friend to follow as she bounded toward camp, eager to tell Badgerstar about their accomplishment.

# Chapter 8 > > Aftermath

[image]

"You what?!" The old leader exclaimed. He paused from his grooming to stare incredulously at Frostpaw and Willowpaw, both of whom struggled to keep their pride under control. Frostpaw couldn't help but lift her chin and square her shoulders.

"I am very impressed by your clever thinking, this will be very helpful for the Clan," he said. "But you deliberately went against my orders. Need I remind you that my word is law?"

The two apprentices shared a guilty glance before staring at the ground. Badgerstar rose from his nest and gave his fur a shake. "I'm sure your mentors will find an appropriate punishment for the both of you. In the meantime, I must call the Clan for a meeting." He paused and stifled a purr of amusement. "It seems I am doing that quite often lately."

They exited the leader's den and found Ashpelt and Beeflight waiting impatiently for them.

Beeflight met the she-cats before Ashpelt could scold them. "Do you know where the other apprentices are? Sunpaw and I were supposed to practice hunting today."

"Uh, no. Sorry," Willowpaw lied, instantly feeling her ears burn with guilt. Beeflight drilled his gaze into her eyes. She met it without flinching.

Ashpelt stomped up. "Where have you been? Sneaking off like--" He was interrupted by Badgerstar's call.

The cats made their way to gather around Highledge, muttering in confusion to one another. Willowpaw slipped away from Ashpelt, but knew he would return to pick that bone some other time. She found her mother and joined her at the outer edge of the assembly.

Badgerstar proceeded to announce Willowpaw and Frostpaw's discovery on how to disable the traps, which aroused surprised looks and congratulatory words. Willowpaw tried - and failed- to duck away from Hollyheart's nuzzle.

"Because of this new threat, I would like to implement a new patrol. Starting next sunrise, a trap patrol will go out to ensure that any and all traps in this forest are disabled. Frostpaw will accompany the first one to demonstrate how to do so." Badgerstar finished.

Willowpaw noticed that this was met with mixed reactions. Greeneyes, Scarletfang and Foxtooth didn't seem thrilled at the idea of more patrols, whereas others quivered their tails in excitement.

"I am so proud of you, Willowpaw." Hollyheart said, and then her eyes hardened. "In the future though, don't do something so dangerous. Badgerstar knows what's best, so respect his word by following it. I couldn't imagine if something happened to you."

"Yes, mother," Willowpaw responded.

The cats had begun to dissipate and go about their duties. Hollyheart gave her daughter one last nuzzle before joining Oakfur to share tongues.

Willowpaw felt a sudden rush of joy that *she* of all the members in the Clan had been praised by the leader. *I could get used to this!* She thought, giving the already sleek fur on her chest another lick.

"So that's what you were doing at sunrise!"

She jumped a little, her previous composure somewhat ruffled. Woodpaw and his brother were standing behind her, fur spiked in curiosity. Frostpaw came trotting over to join the talk. She held her nose high and brought with her an air of superiority.

"Yeah, you always have all the fun," Sunpaw complained. His blue-gray eyes shone with envy.

"What about the fun *you* were having this morning?" Frostpaw countered, staring intently at the toms.

Sunpaw opened his mouth to give a stinging reply, but instead muttered, "We were hunting," and stalked away. Woodpaw shuffled his paws awkwardly and followed Sunpaw.

"Way to kill the conversation," Willowpaw pointed out.

"They're up to something fishy," Frostpaw sniffed, keeping her gaze on them as Beeflight stalked up and began to chew them out.

Willowpaw groaned, throwing her head back. "Don't tell me you want to do another mission."

Frostpaw purred. "A mission? I like the sound of that word. But no, I think I've had enough daring *missions* for now." Her aura of arrogance dropped.

Across camp, Pondpaw brushed out of the medicine den and trotted over to the fresh-kill pile, where she chose a sparrow.

"I'll catch up with you later," Frostpaw said as she spotted her sister, and went to meet her.

"Alright, I'll be in the medicine den," Willowpaw mewed, rising to her paws. Surely Brightblossom didn't know of her and Frostpaw's accomplishment!

She noticed that a chilly breeze had turned the air crisp and dry, signaling the approach of leaf-bare. It wouldn't be long before the trees were completely stark and prey ventured deep in their burrows to escape the fur-freezing cold.

Despite this, Willowpaw looked forward to her first leaf-bare. She could almost feel the alien texture of snow under her pads. *Hopefully the apprentices' den is draft free* she shuddered at the thought of having to shiver herself to sleep.

Willowpaw gave a long stretch before heading to the medicine den. As she was walking across camp, she saw Ashpelt and Fadedleaf sharing a mouse in a splash of sunshine. Normally something of that sort wouldn't catch her eye, but the fact that he kept casting soft glances at her between bites made Willowpaw sniff.

Although midday had yet to arrive, she felt as though it was much later. *If I'm lucky, I won't have to go on any patrols before sundown.*

She brushed through the curtain of ferns into the cool, dim den. Brightblossom was laying on a swathe of moss near the entrance.

Her mentor lifted her head as she approached. "Willowpaw! It's good to see you," she exclaimed, raised herself to a sitting position while being careful not to put any weight on her wound.

"How's the medicine den treating you?" Willowpaw asked. She saw that Brightblossom's injured paw was wrapped tightly in leaves and a sticky paste that was smothered underneath made the surrounding fur spiky

"It's nice, I suppose- although there is nothing to do. My legs are *aching* for a good hunt." She meowed, shaking scraps of bedding out of her fur.

Fawndapple emerged from the herb storage towards the back of the den, a bundle of leaves in her jaws. She greeted Willowpaw with a wave of her tail.

"Please don't move that poultice around too much or the wound may reopen," she warned.

Brightblossom gave an exaggerated sigh and flopped back into her nest. She reminded Willowpaw of an apprentice at times.

Fawndapple gingerly sat beside her injured leg and began redressing the wound, starting by peeling off the current bandage.

"She needs to rest. Please go on now," the medicine cat shuffled her paws but kept her eyes on the task at hand.

Willowpaw dipped her head and was about to leave when she remembered the reason she had come in the first place. "Actually, if you don't mind, I wanted to tell Brightblossom something *very* important."

Both she-cats looked up at the young apprentice.

"You'll never believe it!" She cried, the excitement getting the best of her.

Brightblossom's eyes widened and she nodded for her to go on.

"Frostpaw and I discovered a way to disable the traps!" Willowpaw announced, the now familiar rush of pride came surging back. She couldn't help but puff out her chest.

Her mentor's mouth dropped open in complete shock and she stared at her unbelievably. "You...what?" She was stumbling over words.

Willowpaw's tail drooped. *Not exactly the reaction I was expecting.* "Well, yes. I thought you would be proud of me," she mewed.

"No, no, I am! That was very dangerous and reckless of you two, though. You could have ended up like me, or worse!" She pointed out, concern shining in her odd eyes.

"I know, I'm getting that a lot." Willowpaw gave a small sigh.

*Can't anyone just be happy I saved their tails?*

Fawndapple chewed up a leaf and spat the wad onto Brightblossom's wound. It was a jagged gash that circled its way around her forepaw. The white she-cat wrinkled her nose at it and gave a disgusted sniff.

As Fawndapple packed it tightly on the wound, Brightblossom clenched her teeth to keep from expressing the pain.

Willowpaw bid farewell to her mentor and the medicine cat and padded out. Stepping out into the bright camp, her eyes automatically searched for Frostpaw.

She wasn't too hard to spot- the ginger and white she-cat was chatting animatedly to Woodpaw and Pondpaw, while Sunpaw and Birdpaw shared a piece of prey. The four apprentices glanced up and dipped their heads as Driftbreeze approached them.

Willowpaw sped her pace to find out what was going on.

"-to show them how to incapacitate one of those traps." The deputy told Frostpaw. The apprentice received awed stares from her denmates as she assumed a serious expression and nodded solemnly.

With a wave of Driftbreeze's tail, a small patrol gathered behind her. "Take upmost caution," she said.

The cats then filed out of the gorge, with Frostpaw right behind her father, Sootclaw.

Willowpaw padded up and greeted the rest of the apprentices.

"So Frostpaw is a celebrity now?" Woodpaw said, dragging his tongue across a hind leg.

Willowpaw snorted. "Sure, but I helped her get there." She gave a long yawn. "Great StarClan, I'm tired!"

"Then don't go out on any more heroic adventures. At least, not without me." Woodpaw narrowed his eyes mischievously.

Sunpaw looked up, "Or me!"

He scrunched up his face as Birdpaw shoved the mouse under his nose. She didn't join the collective conversation.

Pondpaw excused herself, stepping away.

"Well then I guess I'll have to get used to being tired, then." Willowpaw collapsed onto her side and let her eyelids gently fall. The sun warmed her fur and filled her body with the desire for nothing but rest.

*A nap would feel wonderful.* She thought lazily. *Just let me close my eyes for a heartbeat...*

Her breathing slowed as sleep sealed her eyes shut and swept her away.

~ ~ ~

"What are you doing? You're not an elder yet." Willowpaw woke to Ashpelt's insistant meow.

She blinked awake to see that behind him was a patrol. "Driftbreeze wanted you to join us for a hunting patrol, if you're not too busy," Ashpelt said.

Willowpaw scrambled to her paws, muttering apologies and excuses. Once she had blinked the sleep from her eyes, she fell in line with the rest of the cats that were waiting with amused expressions.

Ashpelt led the patrol along the WindClan border, where Willowpaw caught a stray rabbit out of sheer luck and a crow. On the way back, Greeneyes found a trap, which Willowpaw proceeded to show the patrol how to disable.

By the time Willowpaw entered camp she was utterly exhausted from her long day. After eating the crow she had killed, she immediately headed to her nest. Frostpaw had beat her there, tail curled tightly around her body and sleeping soundly. Willowpaw copied her friend, feeling another bout of pride at her accomplishments that day.

*If I keep this up, I'll be a warrior in no time!*

# Chapter 9 >> First Scuffle

[image]

A light dawn rain showered the forest with sparkling drops that clung to the leaves and made the undergrowth shimmer. A patrol of cats moved like spirits between the trees, disturbing not even the smallest creature.

A sturdy tom with slate gray fur flecked a shade darker led. He wove between arching ferns with a practiced ease that only a ThunderClan cat could possess. Behind him padded a variety of pelts that matched his gait and followed smoothly.

The cats' pace, yet alert, carried with it an air of sleep due to the fact that they had awoken moments earlier. Of the group, two young apprentices were the most attentive. The smaller one had her tabby fur puffed out to dispel the chilly mist while the taller she-cat trodded along without paying mind to the weather.

Half a moon had passed since the two found a way to trick the traps that had threatened the Clan, thus saving them from any more unfortunate accidents. The clanmates were now able to make border rounds without avoiding every leaf-strewn portion of ground and clinging to worn trails. They could feel safe in their own territory once more.

The tom at the head of the patrol looked over his shoulder. "Be cautious. There have been stray ShadowClan scents found on our side of the border and they could still be lingering about." He then returned his attention to the path without waiting for a response.

The shorter apprentice craned her head as her friend whispered, "You know what, Willowpaw? If we meet any ShadowClan fleabags, I'll beat their fur off personally!" She flexed her claws against the ground and showed her bright sharp teeth.

Willowpaw flicked her ears as a heavy drop fell from a leaf onto her head. "We haven't really been taught that many fighting moves yet,

Frostpaw." She pointed out. After all the stories she had heard about the cruel ShadowClan warriors, she wasn't sure if she wanted to meet one just quite yet.

"It doesn't matter, I'll shred their ears," Frostpaw said matter of factly. She quickened her pace and waved her tail high in the air.

Willowpaw scrambled to catch up. With a mischievous glint in her eyes, she teased, "I'm sure you will... will go running back to Fernbelly!"

Frostpaw hissed lightly and cuffed her friend on the ear before she had the opportunity to dart away. Ashpelt looked up and glared at the two, snorting in disapproval. Willowpaw bit back a loud mrrow of amusement and looked down at the ground to hide her quivering whiskers.

The patrol continued to the border in silence, with only the sound of rain to fill their ears. Yet another chilly breeze plastered their fur to their sides, but this time it brought with it the unmistakable musk of ShadowClan.

The effect was immediate. Sootclaw slowed his pace and motioned with his tail for the others to do the same. Willowpaw's spine bristled in anticipation. Frostpaw's father was a noble warrior. Surely if they came across ShadowClan, his last option would be a fight?

She was sure that other cats were nearby though. The smell was so strong Willowpaw was convinced that she would choke on it. Sootclaw could tell as well, for he signaled the patrol to be on guard; an unneeded gesture, really. All the cats were already on high alert.

"Why are we so scared? This is our territory!" Frostpaw hissed into her friend's ear. But Willowpaw's breath was coming too shallow to answer properly. Meanwhile, Sootclaw continued to step along until they came right up to the border markers, where the cloying stench of ShadowClan hung heavily on each and every tree and bush. The tension that hung in the air was as obvious as the rain soaking their fur.

Just as the patrol was about to refresh their own scents, a lean ShadowClan patrol emerged from behind the pine trees of their territory. Willowpaw realized how mean they looked with their dripping pelts and cold, glimmering eyes. She felt her heart hammering in her chest like a trapped bird. Frantic.

Sootclaw tensed his shoulders but otherwise greeted them calmly. "Duskfall," dipping his head, he greeted the gray warrior.

Duskfall acknowledged him with only the slightest of nods, all the while never dropping his intense gaze. "Frogstar has sent us to speak with Badgerstar," he meowed, voice raspy. Willowpaw noticed him dig his paws into the ground ever so slightly. She narrowed her eyes at him.

The tall ThunderClan tom straightened up, growing several mouse-lengths in height. "And why can't Frogstar come himself, if this is so important?" He asked cooly. Duskfall set his jaw before continuing.

"That is our business. And if you must know why we came, It is because your cats are stealing our prey!"

The ThunderClan patrol's eyes widened in shock.

Ashpelt lashed his tail furiously. "We wouldn't want any of your soggy toads! In fact we have scented your stench on our side!" He growled. This time, Sootclaw didn't try to calm him down. Willowpaw imagined Ashpelt to be a fierce fighter when angry.

In response, both patrols unsheathed their claws and placed their paws firmly on the slippery forest floor.

"I don't believe that!" Duskfall spat, taking a threatening step forward. Sootclaw realized what happened and shot a warning glance at Ashpelt, who was too busy glaring to take the hint.

Turning back to Duskfall, Sootclaw mustered all the level-headedness he could manage and said through somewhat gritted teeth, "We don't want to fight, Duskfall. This--"

He was cut off by the ShadowClan warrior leaping with claws outstretched and tackling him to the ground. Willowpaw gasped

when no later than a heartbeat later, he bellowed, "ShadowClan attack!"

She saw cats flying everywhere as screeches filled the air and shook her bones.

"Father!" Frostpaw yowled. She dashed over to where Sootclaw was rolling with Duskfall in a hissing tussle.

Willowpaw took quick notice of the scene. Fadedleaf and Ashpelt were fighting side by side against two huge ShadowClan warriors. Volefur was standing his ground against a sleek black cat who struck quick like a snake before recoiling and going on the defensive. But before she could seek out Frostpaw, she came barreling up with an apprentice hard on her paws. "Help me get rid of this fleabag," she hissed, and whirled around to face the opponent.

The apprentice skidded to a short stop on the slick grass and almost ended up crashing into them. Willowpaw scrambled out of the way while Frostpaw rammed the cat so that she lost her balance and fell. Willowpaw took advantage of the opportunity and raked her paw down the apprentice's exposed side. Both she-cats cringed as claw met skin and blood blossomed to the surface. The gray apprentice stumbled backwards despite her friend's rabid "again! Get her on the snout!"

The ShadowClan cat was quick to react on her hesitation. She was back on her paws in an instant and dodged Frostpaw's well-aimed swipe.

Sneering, the apprentice lunged at Willowpaw quicker than she had time to respond to. She felt her breath leave as she was body slammed, and a sharp stinging pain erupted at her ear. It grew unnaturally warm and she knew that her enemy's attack had found its mark. She thought she could hear a caterwaul from the corner of her hazy awareness, and then the weight crushing her was lifted. Willowpaw looked up just in time to see Frostpaw writhing on the ground with the apprentice and raking her belly furiously, which gave her a chance to recover.

Looking around, she saw Volefur was fending off two she-cats. He caught her eye in between swipes and gave a small shake of his head. Willowpaw understood the message and whipped back to where her friend was fighting. Frostpaw paused for a heartbeat to take a breath, whereas the ShadowClan apprentice didn't need one since she had played defensive.

Willowpaw watched helplessly as the apprentice grasped Frostpaw with thorn sharp claws and bit down on her shoulder so hard it tore a throat burning wail from her. Frostpaw than cried again and fell backwards onto the ground, motionless. The ShadowClan cat planted one paw firmly on her stomach and raised the other just above the head.

An intense haze of rage, terror and pure instinct overcame Willowpaw, and with strength she didn't know she had, launched herself at the enemy. She was caught by surprise and hissed as Willowpaw rolled her onto her back and pinned down her flailing claws. It was her turn for revenge. She knew there would be just enough time to land a blow. One with just enough pain to make that frog-breath think twice about attacking ThunderClan again.

But as the dripping wet tabby unsheathed her claws and decided where to attack, the pounding in her heart slowed her speed and clarity of thought.

The ShadowClan apprentice made no effort to escape and instead pulled her ears back and jeered, "Too scared to fight back, kittypet?"

Willowpaw locked right onto the apprentice's eyes and drew a sharp breath at the sight of her reflection. Time seemed to slow as she absorbed every detail that terrified her beyond a hundred badgers. There she stood, light specks of fur stained red dusting her nose and all around her ear, where she could see the blood dribbling out. With her fur flattened against her frame, she looked desperate and crazed. Not at all with who she had imagined herself to be in battle. *I look like a monster...* She realized.

Unconsciously she took a pace back, allowing the ShadowClan apprentice to wriggle free. She placed a heavy swat on the top of Willowpaw's head before darting away. But the pain seemed

irrelevant compared to the image that was left searing in her mind.

Behind Willowpaw, Frostpaw struggled to her paws, gasping in agony as a new stream of blood ran from the puncture at her shoulder. Before any of them could have the chance to speak, Sootclaw's yowl rang above the clamor of fighting cats, "ThunderClan, retreat!" It was the dismaying call that no side wanted to hear from their leader. A sign not that of victory, but of utter defeat.

"Come on, Willowpaw." Frostpaw said dejectedly, limping over to the cover of the undergrowth on the ThunderClan side of the border. Willowpaw watched as her clanmates left their individual battles and disappeared into the forest while the ShadowClan cats yelled insults and cheered. A hollowness of their first loss settled inside her as she followed the rest of her Clan to a safer place to regather.

Sootclaw and the rest of the ThunderClan warriors stood some ways from the border, assessing wounds and contemplating what went wrong. Frostpaw appeared beside her friend, looking defiant despite her injuries.

"What did you do?" She hissed.

Willowpaw glanced up, mind wandering elsewhere. "Wh....What do you mean?"

Frostpaw snorted and swatted at her good ear. "You let that ShadowClan- hey, are you okay?" She tried to catch her friend's eyes, but Willowpaw sat and washed the fur on her chest.

As she did so, she noticed that her legs felt wobbly and numb. But upon glancing around she noticed that none of the other warriors seemed shaken up, just crestfallen. *That's not who I am, is it?* Willowpaw worried. Surely other apprentices felt like this after their first battle?

"Willowpaw?" Frostpaw asked again. This time, real concern glowed in her eyes. She shuffled over and pressed herself against her for support.

"Yes, I just..." Willowpaw looked around again at all the others, who weren't whining about their issues. "Never mind, I'm fine." She pulled away from her friend and twitched her whiskers in a reassuring manner. "Thanks though."

Frostpaw wasn't completely convinced but didn't press for answers.

The sodden gray apprentice busied herself with the mindless task of cleaning her pelt. Yet, her head buzzed with the image of herself that she had seen except every time she envisioned it, it became increasingly terrifying.

Sootclaw continued his assessment of the patrol and approached the two apprentices. Frostpaw was able to see her father up close for the first time since the fight and she gasped. Most of the blood has been washed away by the rain but clumps of his fur were still stained crimson, especially around the wounds. Suddenly, her injuries seemed like bug bites.

He looked over both she-cats and lowered his head. "I wish this could have ended a different way, but ShadowClan is awfully predictable." He lowered his voice so only they could hear. "If I am being honest, I would have kept fighting... but I knew that you two were here and it was your first time against ShadowClan. I did not want to risk something bad happening..." He nuzzled Frostpaw, purring.

Sootclaw brightened as he said, "on a better note, I am so proud of the both of you. Those fleabags fought hard." His daughter purred and rubbed heads again. When they had finished, his former leaderly attitude returned. "So are you two alright?" He asked, looking them over once more.

Frostpaw nodded and straightened, trying to hide her bite mark. "I'm fine, but Willowpaw isn't." She said pointedly, shooting an accusing look at her friend. Sootclaw glanced at her, concern flashing in his eyes.

"Alright, let's get back to camp as soon as possible then," he said, whisking away and rounding up the rest of the cats.

The ThunderClan warriors looked up from what they were doing and rose to their paws. Ashpelt finished cleaning Fadedleaf's injuries and Volefur gave his foreleg one last wash before standing. Sootclaw flicked his ears and they were off.

Frostpaw gave Willowpaw a nudge to get her blank gaze off the ground and led her along with her tail.

"I don't know if I can be a warrior anymore," she whispered half to herself. Frostpaw stared at her in disbelief, and in result almost tripped over a hazardous tree root.

"What are you talking about? You did a solid job fighting that ShadowClan apprentice. In fact, if you hadn't helped I would have been crowfood!" It was rare that Frostpaw ever self-depreciated but Willowpaw knew that Frostpaw had done more fighting in the battle than she had.

She met her eyes with a desperate pleading. "You don't understand, I let that apprentice go because I couldn't hurt her. I -"

"But you did before." Frostpaw interrupted.

"Yes, but I hated it. When I had that apprentice pinned, I saw my reflection in her eyes. I looked like a... monster..." She shuddered as it flashed through her mind once again.

"You're no monster. I guess you aren't used to fighting. I'm sure you will get comfortable with it eventually. Get Pondpaw to give you some poppy seeds and you'll be fine." Frostpaw said simply.

Willowpaw nodded, but inside she had her doubts. *What would happen if I couldn't be a warrior? Would I have to be a medicine cat? But Fawndapple already has an apprentice...*

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The rain continued to fall, but growing lighter as the sun rose. Small birds that had been hiding between the leaves now came out and enjoyed its weak rays. But the group of wild cats that now trudged through the soggy grass back to their home did not particularly appreciate the weather.
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Little did they know, it was to be the last of its kind for a very long time.

# Chapter 10 > > Trauma

[image]

Sootclaw led the patrol into camp wordlessly. But words weren't needed for their Clanmates to notice the condition they were in. Their scruffy appearance drew attention, and Driftbreeze was the first to pad over, mixed emotions swimming in her amber eyes.

"What in the name of StarClan happened?" She demanded, lashing her tail.

Sootclaw met her intense stare. "ShadowClan attacked while we checked the border. Something about prey stealing but if you ask me, they were looking for an excuse to fight." He turned his head around and flicked his ears at Willowpaw. "She needs to see Fawndapple."

Driftbreeze sent Willowpaw away without another glance. The tabby apprentice was more than relieved to be able to get away from the cats so that she could have some alone time and reflect on the battle.

She noticed that the drizzle had stopped and the previously dreary clouds now were scuttling away to leave behind a bright blue sky. A cool, albeit humid, breeze spun lazily into the gorge. It toyed with her whiskers and caressed her pelt with invisible paws.

Willowpaw was then reminded of her late brother, Jaykit.

The thought had startled her, due to the fact that her littermade was now just a hazy memory. But the soft touch of the wind brought back recollections of the warm nursery and the feel of downy furs against her own.

*Are you up there, Jaykit?* Willowpaw wondered quietly. She cast a glance up at the sky. *Are you in StarClan right now, watching over us?*

Sighing, she turned her focus to her paws as they progressed to the medicine den.

"Hey, you leaving without me?" Frostpaw trotted up beside her friend and laid her tail across her shoulders.

Willowpaw, still cloudy with memories, wore a distant expression. But the delicate mist was driven away by the overpowering energy coming from Frostpaw. She knew her denmate well enough to know that she was dying to talk about the battle. At least she had the decency to stay quiet.

Both apprentices continued in silence until they reached the den entrance. As they approached, Pondpaw spotted them from where she was exiting the elders' den. She raised her tail in greeting, then it dropped upon closer examination.

"What in StarClan's name happened to you?!" She exclaimed, rushing over.

Frostpaw was eager to answer. "We were attacked! By ShadowClan!" Her eyes were gleaming with excitement. "We kicked their tails, by the way."

Pondpaw nudged her sister. "Alright, you. C'mon let's get those scratches fixed." She motioned for the she-cats to follow and led them to the den.

There was an uneasy silence between Frostpaw and Willowpaw. The ginger and white apprentice kept her head down and distanced herself from her friend.

Upon reaching the den, Pondpaw called for Fawndapple, who was in the back working with herbs.

Willowpaw realized that this would be Pondpaw's first experience with battle injuries, and was thankful that it wouldn't be the apprentice treating her wounds. She sat against one of the walls of the den and began grooming her fur. The taste was that of faint blood and dirt.

Meanwhile, Frostpaw flexed her claws and pawed the ground,

scoring small marks in the dust. Every few heartbeats she would glance over at Willowpaw then look back at the ground. Her almost arrogant aura had faded, and now she looked awkward- uncommon for the boisterous young cat.

Fortunately, the medicine cat appeared from the shadows in the back of the den. Her fur was standing up and eyes the size of saucers. She didn't ask questions though, only trotted over and began washing Willowpaw's wounds. Willowpaw assumed that she would pick up bits of the fight from her Clanmates who were bound to stop by for herbs.

Fawndapple paused and said in a soft, calm voice, "Frostpaw, could you please start cleaning your wound?" The apprentice bent her head and complied.

To Pondpaw she asked for a poppy seed.

Willowpaw began to feel strength trickle back into her body after eating the poppy seed. In an effort to assuage Frostpaw's frequency of worried glances, she straightened up and forced her eyes to uncloud. It seemed to work.

The medicine cat finished washing Willowpaw's wounds and chewed up some leaves to make poultice. She instructed Pondpaw to follow suit. It was silent as they worked the leaf bits into a sticky consistency akin to sap, but much less runny.

Once they had finished and started smothering it onto the apprentices' scratches, Pondpaw tried to make conversation. "That's a nasty split on your ear! You must have really beaten up ShadowClan for that." She marveled at Willowpaw and twitched her whiskers.

"Frostpaw was really the one that made them pay." Willowpaw stiffened as Fawndapple applied a wad on the bridge of her nose, sending a sting of pain through her face.

Her friend's expression softened and she surprised everyone by saying modestly, "Thanks, but we did it together."

Fawndapple inspected Willowpaw for any wounds that she missed. When satisfied, she made her way to Frostpaw and dismissed Pondpaw, telling her to take a break. "You keep from doing anything that can dislodge the poultice. In fact," She said to Willowpaw, pointing with her ears to a fluffy patch of moss along the opposite wall. "I want you to rest in that nest for the time being." She then bent her head and continued her work on Frostpaw.

The young apprentice felt a wave of exhaustion wash over her as she looked at the soft bed of moss. She meandered over and collapsed, letting its fuzzy tendrils encase her.

A gentle sleep tugged at her conscious and she drifted away.

*Slitted eyes. Bloody dripping fangs. Pelt stained crimson.*

*That's me!*

*With a snap, the gaping mouth closed, and Willowpaw felt a cold sensation tingling through her spine.*

Gasping, she awoke to an empty den. Willowpaw noticed the previously scattered herbs were now stacked in a neat pile against the far wall. *How long did I nap?*

She rose to her forepaws and washed her fur, careful to avoid the stinking patches of herbs. *I don't understand why this is affecting me so harshly...Every warrior has fought before... Am I weak?*

A sharp spike of fear sent her stomach plummeting and quickened her breath. *No, no. Toughen up, furball!*

Willowpaw inhaled deeply and let the air fill her chest until she thought it would burst. Then she released it in a gusty sigh. *Perhaps a walk will do me well.*

She was ready to leave the den when Hollyheart brushed in, followed by Oakfur. Her mother looked fraught with worry. Fur risen, eyes round and dark with worry. Oakfur was more relaxed but carried with him an anxious air. He padded over and nuzzled his daughter, purring.

Hollyheart almost went limp with relief and joined her mate in purring and covering Willowpaw with licks.

"Watch the medicine," Willowpaw warned, shying away.

Oakfur drew back and scanned her up and down. "Are you alright? Sootclaw told us that you weren't feeling good after the battle." His eyes clouded with confusion. "But you don't look too hurt."

Hollyheart glared at him before speaking. "We would have come earlier but we were on patrol. He told us you fought quite well." She nuzzled her daughter once more. "We're so proud of you."

Willowpaw felt her worries fade for a moment and in its place a warm feeling that reminded her of her nursery days. "Thank you. And I'm fine, I'm just... frazzled I suppose. First battle, you know?"

Hollyheart nodded and gave one last nuzzle before backing up and standing beside her mate.

Willowpaw nuzzled her parents once more and said, "I'm going to take a walk. Thank you for checking on me."

The three cats said their goodbyes and Willowpaw padded out of the den. *If I just give myself time to think this over, it'll be fine.* She reassured herself. *After all, what's the worst that could happen?* Instantly, a torrent of terrible scenarios played in her mind. *Never mind, never mind.*

As she trotted on, lost in thought, she almost forgot where she was going. Stopping in the center of the camp, Willowpaw sought out the cat who could help her with this.

"Brightblossom!" She called, spotting the pretty white she-cat sharing a mouse with Larksong.

Her mentor swallowed her bite and looked up with her odd-eyes. "Hello, Willowpaw!" She mewed. Excusing herself, she rose and met

her apprentice. "How did your first border scuffle go?"

Willowpaw shifted on her paws uneasily. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about...Could we go for a walk?"

Brightblossom wore a puzzled expression but didn't press. She motioned with her tail for her apprentice to lead.

". . .I was scared of myself. . ." Willowpaw finished. It was a relief to get it off of her chest. Especially with someone who would take her seriously, unlike Frostpaw.

Her mentor's face was now troubled as she listened. "There is nothing to be afraid of. You are a smart young cat--"

"—But I don't like the feeling of knowing that I hurt another cat. I- I don't know why... I guess I'm scared that I will lose control and go crazy..." She looked up at Brightblossom, desperate for reassurance.

To her surprise, Brightblossom let out a humorous mrrow. She stopped walking and sat, looking Willowpaw in the eye. "I think you have been listening to too many kit-stories. All those terrible cats that you hear about- Tigerstar, Finchstar- they more or less *chose* to do what they did. They consciously struck fear into their cats. You have a good head, so I wouldn't even entertain the idea."

"Believe me, once you pass this obstacle, you are going to become a powerful warrior. Both skill and virtue are something to be sought after. Now if you like, we could do some extra battle training before dawn." She offered.

Willowpaw's eyes grew wide. "Really?"

When her mentor nodded, it felt as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

"Later, though. I want you to take it easy for now. We'll do some hunting tomorrow, but that's all. In fact, when we get back to camp I want you to eat and relax. I'm really proud of you, Willowpaw." She laid her tail across her shoulders.

"Promise I won't have to become a medicine cat?" Willowpaw

pleaded.

Brightblossom had to keep her whiskers from quivering too much as she said, "You have my word. Now head back to camp. I'm going to try and catch some prey before my leg starts bothering me." She raised her limb gingerly. The wound continued to heal but was not completely back to normal.

Willowpaw gratefully dipped her head and left her mentor to hunt. As she made her way back to camp, there was a bounce to her step and a new, glowing confidence.

*Next time I'll be ready for sure!*

# Recap

[image]

A council in StarClan determined that a threat will be facing the Clans. Firestar convinced them to send the sign to Willowpaw of ThunderClan.

Willowkit's siblings (Jaykit and Pouncekit) are very ill and their mother, Hollyheart, constantly worries about them. That same day whilst all the kits were napping, Jaykit began to choke (combination of swollen throat and phlegm). Best friends Frostkit and Willowkit are ushered out of the nursery and join Frostkit's mother and sister: Fernbelly and Pondkit, respectively.

Willowkit and Frostkit sneak away and find a secret place to spy on the nursery, where they overhear Fawndapple trying to save the choking Jaykit. Alas, there was nothing she could do and he died. Willowkit and Frostkit sneak back to Fernbelly. She tells the kits of Firestar's legacy and his deeds. Willowpaw is in awe of the great leader and it takes her mind off of Jaykit.

In the subsequent moon, Willowkit's only other sibling (Pouncekit) dies. Hollyheart and her mate Oakfur are deeply saddened by this, Hollyheart sinking into depression. She continues to blame Fawndapple for not doing enough. Meanwhile, Pondkit shows interest in becoming a medicine cat.

Badgerstar gathers the Clan for the kits' apprentice ceremony. Hollyheart's spirits lift as she watches her only kit become an apprentice. Willowpaw's mentor is Brightblossom, a young and enthusiastic she-cat. Frostpaw's mentor is Ashpelt, a rather aloof tom. Pondkit becomes a medicine cat apprentice to Fawndapple.

Brightblossom and Ashpelt take their apprentices on a tour of ThunderClan territory. Ashpelt offers an apathetic explanation of the fellow Clans.

When they return to camp, the friends regroup with Pondpaw and

share stories about their first day as 'paws. After chatting and eating, Willowpaw and Frostpaw head to the apprentices den for shut eye. Upon entering, the other apprentices' conversation abruptly halts.

The next day, the mentors gather all the apprentices for a group training session on identifying scents. Willowpaw is apt and picks up the skill quickly. After the others take their turns, the group returns to camp.

The dawn patrol arrives very late back and immediately goes to talk to the leader, Badgerstar. Willowpaw tries to overhear their conversation and picks up *traps.* The Clan leader calls a meeting to announce the presence of twoleg traps in the forest and mandates that no cat is to venture in the woods alone.

Willowpaw, Frostpaw and Pomdpaw are selected to go to their first gathering. They see the other Clans in person for the first time and find that even leaders aren't above occasional grudges. Badgerstar announces the appearance of traps in ThunderClan territory.

Later, the friends go out for a training session. They practice defensive and offensive moves. Willowpaw initially struggles before Brightblossom offers a few words of guidance. Willowpaw and Frostpaw then try a mock battle, in which she is losing until a clever idea springs into her head. The gray tabby uses a tree trunk to pounce on her friend and finish the fight, despite it being an unconventional end.

In the process, she gets a thorn in her paw. So once the fight was over, the mentors decide to head back to camp.

The apprentices fall behind and chat, where Frostpaw applauds her friend for such a clever tactic and they play around.

Suddenly, they hear a screech from up ahead and Ashpelt orders them to fetch Badgerstar.

The apprentices exchange a glance and blunder back to camp. Upon returning, they frantically call for their leader, alerting the rest of the Clan in the process.

Badgerstar emerges from his den and assembles a patrol to investigate.

Frostpaw being Frostpaw, she wanted to sneak behind and follow. And in accordance to Willowpaw's personality, she tried to talk her friend out of the horrible decision, which to no one's surprise, didn't work. And after some conflicting thoughts, Willowpaw caught up with her before she had gotten into too much trouble.

They stumble upon a gruesome scene. Brightblossom has her leg caught in some sort of trap and the aforementioned patrol is squabbling over what they're going to do.

Foxtooth notices the two and tries to send them back to camp. Frostpaw protests that they could be of use and Badgerstar just lets them stay.

The deputy, Scarletfang, devises a plan-- by using some sticks, they could pry open the trap wide enough to allow Brightblossom to pull her leg out.

Willowpaw is overcome with horror at seeing her mentor in so much agony. Hoping it will quell her worries, she quickly joins the search.

They find several sticks and with the help of a couple of warriors, they manage to get Brightblossom out.

When they return to camp, she is rushed to the medicine den and Willowpaw gets her thorn removed from her paw. She splits a piece of prey with Frostpaw and her friend suggests that there are more traps, and there must be a way to disable them.

Willowpaw worries that the traps will be the end of the Clan.

She is woken early the next morning by Frostpaw, who convinces her friend to be her partner in crime in disabling a trap. before dawn, they sneak out of camp and go into the woods.

Frostpaw discovers one while Willowpaw is too frightened to focus on her search.

They run across Sunpaw, Woodpaw and Birdpaw, who are surprised to see the two she-cats skulking around as well. They stare at each other before promising not to mention either of their expeditions to anyone.

Willowpaw finds a trap and Frostpaw explains her plan. She takes a pebble and drops it on the trap's pressure plate, snapping shut the jaws.

The two are very eager to tell Badgerstar of their accomplishments and race back to camp, forgetting the encounter with Birdpaw's posse.

The leader is impressed by their clever thinking but reprimands them for acting against his direct orders. He sighs and calls yet *another* Clan meeting.

As the cats gathered around highrock, Beeflight, Sunpaw's mentor, asks Willowpaw about his whereabouts. The two apprentices' thoughts flash back to when they spotted him earlier.

But a promise is a promise.

They lied, telling him that they hadn't seen the other apprentices at all that morning.

Willowpaw found her mother and sat beside her as Badgerstar announced Frostpaw & Willowpaw's discovery. The Clan cheered and exchanged wowed glances.

Badgerstar also announces the formation of a new patrol - trap breakers. Their job is to hunt out as many as they can and use Frostpaw's technique to debilitate them.

After the meeting, Willowpaw's mother applauds her for her ingenuity but frets about being careful. With a last nuzzle she pads away, leaving Willowpaw glowing with pride. She felt famous.

After chatting with Frostpaw and the recently-returned Sunpaw, Willowpaw excuses herself to go to the medicine den. Her mentor, Brightblossom was still resting under Fawndapple's care.

Brightblossom says her wound is getting better, but she is bored out of her mind. Confined to the den, there 's nowhere to stretch her legs. Fawndapple begins redressing her wound and asks Willowpaw to leave.

Willowpaw then remembers why she came to begin with and excitement overcame her. She tells how her and Frostpaw figured out a way to render the traps useless.

Instead of leaping with joy, Brightblossom exhibits concern and disbelief. She worries that her apprentice could have ended up like herself or even worse.

Feeling slightly disappointed in her reaction, Willowpaw bids goodbye to her mentor and goes out into camp. She finds Frostpaw bragging to the other apprentices about their expedition. Before she could catch up, Driftbreeze asks Frostpaw to join the first trap patrol.

Willowpaw joked to Sunpaw and Woodpaw about Frostpaw's newfound fame while Birdpaw managed to distance herself from the conversation.

Willowpaw decides to take a nap in the refreshing sunshine. Just a little shut eye.

It didn't last long. Ashpelt rudely wakes her up and assigns her to a hunting patrol.

Much later, she returns to her den and collapses in exhaustion. Just before falling asleep, she feels a burst of pride. If she kept this up, nothing was stopping her from becoming a warrior quicker!

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Half a moon later, Willowpaw and Frostpaw are on patrol. Sootclaw warns everyone to be careful; ShadowClan scent was recently found straying across the border.

They come across a ShadowClan patrol, just as they feared. With some barbed words, a fight breaks out.

Frostpaw and Willowpaw end up battling a ShadowClan apprentice. When Willowpaw raked her claws along the enemy's side, she cringed and it took the fight out of her. Because she lost her focus, the ShadowClan cat slammed her to the ground and ripped her ear.

Fortunately, Frostpaw was right there. She saved her friend and held the cat at bay.

In an unexpected turn of events, Frostpaw became the one pinned. Just as the apprentice was about to deal some serious damage to her, Willowpaw felt a wave of rage overcome her. She launched herself at her and had the opportunity to take her revenge.

But it was her reflection that prevented this. In a brief moment, she saw herself in the cat's eyes. And Willowpaw realized that she looked like a monster.

Her hesitation allowed the enemy to scratch her one more time before escaping. Somehow, it didn't register. The image was still searing in her mind.

Sootclaw called a retreat on the ThunderClan side and the warriors reassembled just beyond the clearing, bloodied and dispirited.

Frostpaw realizes that Willowpaw is not feeling well and lays off the jokes. She tells her father, Sootclaw and he gathers up the patrol again to lead them home.

On the way back to camp, Frostpaw complimented Willowpaw on her fighting. Yet Willowpaw knew that she had done awful, freezing up in the middle of combat like that. She tells Frostpaw she *couldn't* hurt the apprentice. It made her skin crawl when her claw broke skin.

Willowpaw worries that this could be the end of her warrior training.

As Sootclaw emerges back at camp, Driftbreeze instantly rushes over and demands an explanation.

Willowpaw is immediately sent to the medicine den. While she heads over, a soft breeze brings back memories from the nursery.

She thinks about her deceased brother, Jaykit and if he is watching over her from among the stars.

Her distant thoughts are shattered by Frostpaw, who bounds up and accompanies her. Pondpaw greets her sister and Willowpaw and is shocked at their wounds. Fawndapple comes over and helps patch up their scratches and bites, giving Willowpaw a poppy seed to calm her anxiety.

Under Fawndapple's orders, the gray tabby curled up in one of the nests to rest. Though before she had the chance to slip into a peaceful dozing, an even more frightening image of herself flashed through her head.

She toyed with the idea of taking a walk to clear her mind. Then her mother, Hollyheart brushed inside the den, followed closely by Oakfur. They told her how proud they were of their daughter and congratulated her on how well she fought.

Once they leave, Willowpaw seeks out her mentor. Brightblossom was found sharing prey with another warrior. Willowpaw steals her away for a moment and the two discuss the apprentice's worries.

Brightblossom reassures her that she has nothing to fret over. She goes as far to offer extra battle training before dawn, which Willowpaw accepts graciously.

The chapter ends with reignited hope that Willowpaw will be ready next time a fight comes along.

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*Hello everyone, I'm back! Currently I am on spring break, so as promised, I'm getting a lot of writing done. It's been forever since the last update so I decided to create a recap for you guys, which might save you some time. I know its written a little poorly, but I wanted to be very brief so I could finally get to the new chapter that I'm working on. And that won't be written poorly, I assure you.*

*In the media is a chart showing the family tree of the two main protagonists - Frostpaw and Willowpaw. Note that Pouncekit and Jaykit*

*are deceased.*

*Oh and the next few chapters will be getting good, so get ready! heh heh*

# Chapter 11 > > Suspicion

[image]

The gray tabby placed one paw delicately in front of the other, careful not to rustle anything that would scare her prey. A light breeze spiraled downwind through the trees, carrying with it the scent of mouse.

*...Just a stride closer...*

She glided forward silently. Once within pouncing range, she shifted the weight to her hind paws while keeping herself low to the ground. She timed it so the mouse wasn't paying mind to its surroundings.

The small apprentice bunched up her muscles then soared into the air, claws outstretched.

Though her stalking had been formidable, she misjudged the sun's position. Her shadow fell over the mouse before she landed and the little rodent tried to scurry away.

*Oh no you don't!*

The she-cat flashed her paws out and caught the mouse, swiftly killing it with a sharp nip. She thanked StarClan before covering it up with stiff dirt to be retrieved for later.

Dry leaves crackled as another cat approached. "Well done, Willowpaw! I'm glad you didn't give up when the mouse spotted you." A pretty white she-cat with different colored eyes padded up.

Willowpaw glowed with pride as she finished scraping soil over her kill. She thanked her mentor and continued hunting.

As the two cats entered camp, laden with their bounty, a violent cough rattled the walls of the gorge. All the cats started and glanced around for its source.

Brightblossom and Willowpaw deposited their fresh-kill atop the meager pile. The apprentice noticed that besides what they had brought, only a thin sparrow and mouse had consisted it.

Another cough sounded and this time Raggedclaw was seen speedily limping away from the medicine den.

Behind him scampered Pondpaw, who was insisting that he return to the den.

"Fawndapple told me to give you catmint! She won't be happy if you don't take it!" She tried to coax the elder, but the orange tabby was having none of it. "Fawndapple---"

He quickened his pace to that of a lopsided gallop. "—I don't take orders from apprentices. If Fawndapple wants me to do something she---"

He broke off as a cough forced him to stop dead in his tracks and hunch over.

Pondpaw froze. Then in the next moment she was at his side supporting him.

Willowpaw rushed over. "Do you need any help?" She offered. Pondpaw looked up at her with relief shining in her eyes. She nodded and together the two came on either side of Raggedclaw.

The old tom was now trembling and trying to catch his breath. "C'mon," Pondpaw said gently and began to lead him back. He didn't object this time as they guided him to a soft nest.

"I don't need to be in here," Raggedclaw croaked again. The apprentices exchanged a sarcastic glance.

"Thanks for the help. I don't think I could have dragged Raggedclaw back here on my own." Pondpaw mewed, laying a leaf of catmint in front of the ornery elder.

Willowpaw dipped her head and padded out, just missing Raggedclaw's complaints about the moss being too wet.

She immediately noticed Ashpelt and Fadedleaf sharing prey in a patch of sunlight, sitting closer together than usual. She watched as affection glimmered in Ashpelt's eyes as he listened to Fadedleaf's story.

The thought of food made her belly rumble, but she wasn't feeling hungry just yet. Her paws itched for another outing in the woods. Another adventure. She would never admit to Frostpaw that she secretly enjoyed the thrill of sneaking out.

The deputy caught her attention as she organized a hunting patrol. Having her partner in crime out training, Willowpaw had nothing better to do than join. Driftbreeze acknowledged her with a nod and waved her tail to lead the cats out.

"Haven't you already been hunting today?" She asked over her shoulder.

Willowpaw nodded, then realizing that the deputy couldn't see her, said "Yes, but Frostpaw isn't around."

Driftbreeze twitched her whiskers in amusement before addressing the entire patrol. "Let us try near the abandoned twoleg nest."

Willowpaw fell into step beside Larksong and her father, Oakfur. Once they reached the twoleg nest, a reasonable amount of prey was caught. She was sure that it would feed the Clan for another sunrise.

Her assumption was correct as they returned and there was enough for each cat, with some left over.

Just as Willowpaw was about to breathe a sigh of content, a hacking cough bounced off the gorge walls. It reverberated through the young apprentice and sent a bolt of fear down her spine. The last thing ThunderClan needed was a bout of sickness.

"Eat up, Willowpaw. You don't want to catch greencough,"

Willowpaw jumped as her father appeared beside her to take his share of the food. She nodded, and chose a wren. The thought of her laying ill and helpless in the medicine den scared her into

taking the plumpest bird on the pile.

*After all, I did hunt quite a bit today,* she reasoned.

As Willowpaw settled down by the apprentice den and ate, her mind began to wander. It ventured back to the encounter at the ShadowClan border; the scene replaying itself until the apprentice flicked her tail to rid her thoughts.

*It won't happen again.*

She ran through the battle again but this time Willowpaw countered the ShadowClan cat's strikes using foreknowledge. Though ripping of her claws against skin still sent shudders down her spine, she mentally steeled herself. *I'm to be a warrior. I'm doing it for ThunderClan.*

"You alright over there?" an amused meow startled her. Sunpaw padded up, whiskers twitching.

"What? Oh erm, yeah." Willowpaw felt her ear tips grow warm. The red tom smirked before continuing to the apprentices' den.

Once Sunpaw had left, Willowpaw took a sizeable amount of food and savored the rich meaty flavor. Despite being stiff with cold, it felt good against her empty stomach.

She spotted her mentor emerging from the medicine den and bidding farewell to Fawndapple. Most likely getting a follow-up visit for her old injury. The medicine cat was very thorough with her patients and made sure each one left her care better than they had ever been before.

Brightblossom caught Willowpaw's lingering eyes and twitched her whiskers warmly. "What's up?" she said, approaching.

"Could we practice fighting tomorrow...you know, before regular training?" Willowpaw lowered her voice to a whisper.

Her mentor nodded. "Sure. Be up before dawn and we can head out to the lake. For privacy."

Willowpaw breathed a relieved thanks then made her way to the apprentices' den, where she buried herself deep into her nest. Before sweet sleep could overtake her, the thought of her deceased siblings crept into her mind.

Even if they were still alive, could they have survived the harsh leaf-bare to come? Was it a good thing they were sent to StarClan now rather than suffer longer?

*I wonder what they think of me.* Willowpaw wondered. *I never really knew them. They were sick for as long as I can remember.*

Inevitably, she thought, *would things have been different if they had lived?*

But Willowpaw was asleep before her mind could drift any longer.

The following morning, Willowpaw was up and waiting for her mentor to awaken.

The sky had not yet lightened and glittering stars twinkled from their places among silverpelt. Not even the birds were awake, still sleeping soundly in their nests.

Willowpaw stifled a yawn. She sat in the center of camp, letting her chin rest against her chest. Her eyelids threatened to fall at any moment and it took all of her willpower to stay conscious.

It was then that the heavy fog of silence was broken. A rustling. No more than the swishing of leaves and scraping of moss. In another occasion, a suitable excuse would be the wind, or stirrings of a warrior in his nest. But the air was still and it was louder and more consistent than the average toss and turn.

Willowpaw was instantly brought to wakefulness and swiveled her ears. Somebody else was up and about the camp. *Intruders?*

More scuffling. She located the sound's source to be coming from the apprentices' den, not from enemy cats. Hushed voices added to the rustlings.

*If they're trying to be quiet, they're not doing a very good job.*

Willowpaw observed.

She rose and slipped into a corner of the hollow, where the deepest shadows lay.

No sooner had she hidden, Sunpaw poked his head from the mouth of the den. Willowpaw could see his eyes flashing in the moonlight as he scanned the camp.

"All clear!" He hissed behind his shoulder and popped out into the open, keeping low to the ground. Woodpaw and Birdpaw followed.

*Now what in StarClan could they be up to?* Willowpaw made herself as small as possible. *What could make them act so secretive?* She remembered when she and Frostpaw had bumped into the posse and they behaved remarkably suspicious. Now her imagination ran wild with all sorts of scenarios that the three could be getting themselves into.

A voice snapped her thoughts back to the shifty apprentices.

"So where is Willowpaw then? She obviously wasn't in her nest," Woodpaw pointed out.

Her breath caught in her throat as he swept his eyes around the darkness.

Once their search found nothing except shadows, Sunpaw led them to the camps entrance.

"Well you know that Willowpaw and Frostpaw are inseparable, so she can't be out on some crazy adventure. Not like she would anyway. Scared of everything." Birdpaw snorted.

Sunpaw slapped his tail across her mouth and received a scathing glare.

Willowpaw felt grateful at his quick defense of her, but it was short lived.

Sunpaw hissed, "Hush! Someone's going to hear you. That's if the whole camp wasn't already woken by Woodpaw's *blundering*." He

cuffed his brother over the ear.

But they lowered their voices as they snuck past the half-asleep camp guarder, Volefur.

Willowpaw was left in the darkness, hunched and indignant. Birdpaw's words had hit her in a vulnerable spot. *I'm not a fraidy-mouse, am I?* She could think up several occasions where she had went out of her comfort zone.

But deep down, she knew that Frostpaw was the only reason for her bravery.

As the camp sank back into its previous, silent state, Willowpaw could feel her chances slipping away.

*I could follow them. It's time for my own adventure.*

A gnawing urge to go was eating at her conscious.

*This is the second time they have been sneaking out! That I know of...* Scrunching her nose, Willowpaw stood and resolved to push herself – without Frostpaw.

An idea began to formulate in her mind.

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# Chapter 12 > > Sneaky

[image]

"Brightblossom," Willowpaw whispered, gently nudging her sleeping mentor. A tremor of apprehension ran through her. How far was she willing to lie in order to devise a good excuse?

The white she-cat cracked open a brilliant green eye. "Mphh?"

Willowpaw shifted her paws. "Ah, my belly doesn't feel good. Can we skip training?" Her voice raised a pitch.

Brightblossom didn't seem to notice. She only nodded and promptly fell back asleep.

*That was easy!* Willowpaw was relieved. She reentered the clearing.

*I'm good at scenting, right? I'll just keep my distance... and stay downwind.* Willowpaw reasoned. She waited until the camp returned to its previous undisturbed state before following them out.

Volefur remained asleep at his post. Willowpaw crept carefully around him, watching him all the while.

*Good thing there's not some sneak attack patrol tonight. We would have all been dead,* she thought with a snort.

Once she had entered the woods, she easily found the scent trail of the apprentices. They had made no effort to disguise it.

Somewhere in the treetops an owl screeched. It sent a jolt through Willowpaw. She realized just how stupid of a plan this was. Staying far enough away from them to remain undetected? Alone? Mousebrained. A hasty decision made in the heat of the moment.

Going off into the woods without Frostpaw – without *anybody* felt wrong. Especially with the continued prevalence of traps.

Her paws slowed until she came to a halt. Looking around, her gaze found only darkened trees and flitting shadows. She had a vague idea of where she was, but the forest looked vastly different at night. Once familiar landmarks where unintelligible.

The night had warped the landscape into something she didn't recognize.

Her all-to-acquainted friend, fear, joined her side.

*Who knows what are in these trees at moonhigh?* She fretted.

But Birdpaw's words echoed in her mind.

*"Scared of everything..."*

*"She would never..."*

Willowpaw bit her whiskers. She forced the tide of cold claws to recede. She steeled her gaze onto one point and focused all her mind on that object. Any other thoughts were shoved aside.

Placing one paw forward, she copied the motion with the next, and the next. Suddenly she was walking again.

Continuing to focus directly ahead of her, Willowpaw picked up the trail again.

The owl cried once more, echoing through the branches of bare trees. This time she did not dwell on what lay beyond the edge of her vision. All that mattered was moving forward. Not back. Besides, she could easily smell if a badger or fox were around.

Of course, fear did not take a complete absence. It was still there, pacing in the back of her mind. And Willowpaw used every scrap of willpower to direct her thoughts on the current task.

As she kept practicing her technique, the scents grew fresher. She was catching up.

Without realizing, Willowpaw had made her way towards the ShadowClan border.

Breathing in a deep lungful of air, she found that the path veered a sharp North as it neared the border. *But,* Willowpaw noticed, *they skirted dangerously close.*

She felt a surge of curiosity and excitement. This was really happening! Her own adventure! Frostpaw would be so happy to hear of this. And perhaps a tad envious.

Remembering to stay out of range of detection, Willowpaw sped her pace. She didn't even need to stick around. She just wanted to catch a glimpse of what the apprentices were doing. Just enough to know.

Yet strangely she was led on for what felt like forever. Willowpaw quickly realized that they were at the very Northern edge of the ThunderClan border. It was rarely patrolled, therefore blurring the exact location of the scent marks; she had never been to this part of the territory. In fact, she doubted any of the warriors have. It was just so... obscure.

Willowpaw was so caught up in her head that she almost did not notice the trail pool up ahead. Fortunately she had time to dive into the dense undergrowth before being detected.

Only several fox-lengths ahead, the pelts of her denmates could be spotted. They had stopped and were talking rather loudly.

"So where do you want to go this time?" Woodpaw asked. He seemed to crouch down and examine something before rising again.

"I don't think we've taken the left branch," Sunpaw said.

"That's a bad idea. Chances are it leads straight into ShadowClan territory. Do you know how much trouble we'd get into if Frogstar found us on his land? We would never be allowed out of camp again." Birdpaw pointed out.

The toms sighed.

"But we *always* take the right branch," Woodpaw complained.

"Would you rather go back to camp and do nothing?" Birdpaw

hissed.

The brown apprentice shook his head.

"That's what I thought." Birdpaw muttered.

Sunpaw cleared his throat. "So. Um, we are just going to take the right tunnel and do the same old thing?" He received a glare from Birdpaw and added, "which I don't have a problem with. Just sayin'."

"Toms,"

Willowpaw watched as, one by one, the cats lowered themselves to the ground and...disappeared. Their place was filled only by silence.

*Great StarClan, where did they go?*

She slunk forward until she was positive she wouldn't be seen, then rose. Gone. The cats had simply vanished into thin air.

*But that's not possible, is it?*

Willowpaw sniffed the spot where they had been standing. The smell was still strong; and little scuffles in the dirt showed where their steps had fallen. All signs led towards a clump of dried bramble bushes.

Her previous plan of 'just looking' was out the window. Now she *had* to know what was going on here.

The thick thorns of the plant scraped her face and tugged at her fur, but Willowpaw ignored the discomfort. She trudged through the heavy branches and almost tripped over a hole in the ground.

No, it was bigger than just a hole. A tunnel.

Willowpaw stared dumbly at the gaping jaw in the ground. Faint memories of kit stories told her that tunnels had long been covered up. The danger they posed was too real for the Clans to handle. But according to what she just discovered, they missed one.

Where could this tunnel lead? It could take her to another Clan's territory. It could even lead her far outside Clan borders. Undiscovered land. New opportunities. Limitless adventure.

Without a moment's hesitation, she dove in - which may not have been the best idea.

The tunnel proved to be cramped, even for a cat her size. She had to flatten her fur as best she could and bunch her limbs tight against her body. And going backwards was not an option.

*StarClan, what am I doing? I can't see my own whiskers!*

It was true. If outside had been dark, it was sunny compared to the blackness permeating the air. Breathing became a chore, as did keeping panic at bay.

Willowpaw couldn't help but worry about becoming stuck. If she did get jammed, her only hope was the apprentices. But that would mean getting caught. And true adventurers didn't get caught. They were always one step ahead of their target.

Which Willowpaw obviously was not.

*If Woodpaw and Sunpaw could fit, then so can I. No doubt,* she told herself.

Like she did earlier, Willowpaw started by putting one paw in front of the other and continued from there. She couldn't fail now. Not when she had come all this way.

Closing her eyes helped tremendously. Even though she was not able to see either way, it was more reassuring to be the one not allowing it rather than the tunnel. Crawling through reminded her of kit games. And as long as she kept that mentality, that's all it was. Kit games.

Even when the tunnel split into two branches, she knew which to take. According to Sunpaw, they'd be using the 'right branch' and doing 'the same old thing'.

Easy enough to remember.

Willowpaw breathed a sigh of relief as the tunnel began to widen. It extended for another tree-length before gently sloping upward and lightening.

*Moonlight!* Willowpaw relished being able to breathe fresh air rather than this stifling one. Her only thought now was where she had ended up. The tunnel had probably led her far from ThunderClan territory. *Uncharted land.*

Still crouched, she scurried to the exit and burst out, gasping in cold air. Catching her breath, she looked around.

No longer was the forest floor covered in dense grasses and shrubs. The trees here were larger and more spread apart; the ground consisted of spiky dead grass and fallen leaves. Even the scents were altered into something different.

"What the foxdung?! Willowpaw?!"

The gray tabby whirled around to find the source of the voice.

Sunpaw stood, pelt raised, behind her. "What are you doing here? Were... were you following us?!" His eyes were the size of the moon.

"Langauge," Woodpaw snorted and padded up, landing a swipe on his brother's ear. His gaze caught on Willowpaw. "What in the name of StarClan!!"

Willowpaw was frozen to her spot, tail bushed out. She began to tremble. *No, No! It was not supposed to end like this! Stupid! I should have been more careful! Rushing out of the tunnel like that....*

Sunpaw was first to regain his composure. "Why... in the name of everything that is holy.... Were you following us?" Clearly he was still frazzled.

Willowpaw opened her mouth to speak. But what would she say? *Oh, sorry. You know, I just felt like going for a middle-of-the-night stroll... behind you...and without your knowledge.*

Instead she sat on her haunches and tried to make herself look like

less of a fool. "I was just walking around."

Woodpaw rolled his eyes. "Sure."

Sunpaw glanced around before lowering his voice. "If Birdpaw finds you, she's gonna ensure that Badgerstar knows you were poking around the tunnels. I don't know why but it seems like she has a bone to pick with you."

Willowpaw nodded, suddenly paranoid.

"Hey, where's Frostpaw?" Woodpaw asked, peering around Willowpaw.

She felt her fur heat up. "She's asleep. Back at camp."

The toms exchanged a surprised glance before continuing.

"Listen if you want to know so bad what we're doing, you could have asked. Not *stalked us!*" Sunpaw hissed.

"And you would have told me!" Willowpaw retorted. She knew just how secretive they were.

The toms became lost for words. "Well..." Woodpaw began, then trailed off.

The cats stared blankly at each other for a heartbeat before Willowpaw spoke up.

"Okay.... If you just tell me what you're up to, I'll go back to ThunderClan, no problem." She chose her words carefully.

"And if we don't?" Sunpaw narrowed his eyes.

Willowpaw swallowed. She assumed her offer would be gobbled up. Her mind spun, trying to come up with something.

"Then you're going down with me." The sentence left her mouth before she could comprehend. *Nice.*

Sunpaw threw his head back in exasperation. "Fine! You want to

know so bad, then I'll tell you. I was poking around the edge of ThunderClan territory when I found this tunnel, so I got Birdpaw and my brother and we've been exploring this land." He glared at Woodpaw. "But it isn't easy when *someone* is as noisy as a badger every time we sneak out!"

Woodpaw's eyes widened in indignation. "Says the one who can't keep his mouth shut!"

There was a rustle from just beyond the three and a call, "Woodpaw! Sunpaw! I found a really cool stream!"

The brothers quit their bickering and spun to face Willowpaw.

"What do I do?!" She whispered.

"Hide!" They said in unison.

*Wow I'm so happy with myself. This past Spring Break week, I've already written chapters 11-15. Currently I'm working on 16. If I keep this up, I'll be able to finish the book before summer is over XD*

# Chapter 13 > > Relationships

[image]

The gray tabby looked around wildly for somewhere to conceal herself. The lack of undergrowth made the task particularly hard. At the last moment, she decided to leap back down into the tunnel. Her fur was rubbed backwards and her whiskers pinched but it was better than to be discovered by Birdpaw.

By this time, Willowpaw could hear the she-cat approaching.

"What's up with you two?" Birdpaw said, an accusatory note laced through her voice.

"Ah, nothing. I was just wondering if anyone in the camp will notice our absence." Willowpaw heard Sunpaw recover quickly.

Birdpaw snorted. "I doubt it. There is still plenty of time before dawn. We'll be back by sunrise."

Woodpaw piped up, "so where is this river?"

"It's a stream. And just beyond the mossy oak. C'mon!"

Willowpaw could hear three sets of pawsteps fading as the apprentices left the area. She let out a breath that had been tight against her chest. *That was too close. I really owe those two.*

She closed her eyes and thought about what to do next. She *could* go back to camp, as she said she would do. *Or* she could continue following the three.

*That's a bad idea if I've ever heard one.*

She had sort of promised to go back to ThunderClan if she got the information asked for. And she did. Now she had to uphold her half of the deal. With a sigh, she concluded that she didn't have much of

a choice.

*Besides, I'm tired. Maybe I can sneak in a few winks of sleep before dawn patrols.*

Willowpaw rearranged herself in the tunnel and began to retrace her steps all the way back to ThunderClan camp.

"ThunderClan is prospering and we are proud to announce we have found a permanent solution to the traps that plagued our territory." Badgerstar announced from his perch among the Great Oak. He proceeded to describe Frostpaw's ingenious idea.

Willowpaw shifted her paws and looked around the island. Cats of every Clan had their faces turned toward the ThunderClan leader, perplexed by what he was explaining. She knew that if her friend had been here, she would have been simply bursting with pride. Her plan, being presented at a gathering!

Half a moon had passed since she caught Woodpaw, Sunpaw and Birdpaw sneaking around the abandoned tunnels. Since, the toms kept a tighter leash on Willowpaw and Frostpaw. Their secret could not be revealed, at any cost.

She turned to Woodpaw, who sat next to her, looking bored. "Where'd Sunpaw run off to?"

The brown tom jumped at her voice. "Uh, I'm pretty sure he was talking to the ShadowClan apprentices." He nodded to his brother on the opposite end of where they were standing.

Sunpaw was standing next to a brown and tabby she-cat, mirth lightening his eyes.

Willowpaw's blood froze. *That's the cat!* Her memories instantly snapped back to the ShadowClan border scuffle only a moon ago. That was the same apprentice that fought with her and Frostpaw.

Just looking at her made Willowpaw's pelt crawl. She glanced up at the full moon. It was sinking lower toward the horizon, signaling the approach of morning. The gathering would be over soon. Now she couldn't get the image of the battle from her mind.

Like it had when the event first occurred, it played in a continuous loop. And there was nothing Willowpaw could do about it. In fact, she became so consumed the she drowned out of the words of the other Clan leaders and did not notice when Frogstar called the gathering to an end.

She would have to talk to Sunpaw and find out more about the ShadowClan apprentice. Maybe by knowing more about her, Willowpaw could finally put a name to the scary enemy that had filled her thoughts. Then she wouldn't be so frightening any more.

While the other cats began to dismiss, Willowpaw craned her neck to spot Sunpaw. She found him bidding goodbye to the ShadowClan cat and waited for him to approach.

He found her piercing gaze and padded over. "Everything alright?"

Willowpaw narrowed her eyes. "What's that cat's name?"

Sunpaw glanced behind his shoulder. "You mean Nimblepaw? Just a friend from ShadowClan. Why ask?"

Willowpaw wasn't sure if she should tell him the truth. Did he *have* to know?

In the end, she decided to spill it. "That's the cat who attacked me and Frostpaw a moon ago." Just by uttering the words, a sick feeling bubbled in her stomach.

Sunpaw shrugged. "Hm, I guess that happens. She's really nice though."

Willowpaw opened her mouth in surprise. This was the cat who almost derailed her warrior training! And the same one who almost killed Frostpaw! She shot a glare across the island at the now giggly she-cat. *Mouseheart.*

Sunpaw smirked and nudged her with his shoulder. "What's gotten into you? Jealous much?"

The gray tabby looked at him with an incredulous stare. "You...ugh! Didn't you just hear me?!" She flattened her ears in fury.

"Geez, you need to relax; you're too easy to mess with." Sunpaw couldn't help amusement from sparkling in his eyes.

"You're unbearable," Willowpaw growled and stalked ahead to join the rest of the ThunderClan warriors.

The journey home was uneventful but it gave time for Willowpaw to reflect. Her worries sprouted from the fact that her best friend was ill with whitecough. Frostpaw came down with coughing several sunrises ago and Fawndapple confined her to the medicine den for the time being. Which was a good idea- sickness was spreading through camp like a wildfire.

The only ones who seemed to be immune from it were Fawndapple and Pondpaw.

Willowpaw made sure she was one of the first to reenter camp. She rushed straight for where Frostpaw was sleeping – her temporary nest in the medicine den.

The white and ginger cat's chest rose peacefully with each breath. Occasionally she coughed and stirred but otherwise slept contently.

"Hey," Willowpaw whispered, poking her with a paw.

Frostpaw gave an unhappy noise and cracked open her eyes. "Willowpaw!" She rejoiced, immediately scrambling into a sitting position. Her eyes glowed as she said, "tell me *all* about the gathering."

And so Willowpaw recalled the details of the gathering. She emphasized Sunpaw's sociability with the enemy apprentice. "Nimblepaw," she had said mockingly. Frostpaw had growled and scored the earth with her claws.

The two remained talking in hushed voices until dawn touched the sky with rosy paws.

Fawndapple emerged from the rear of the den, dull-eyed and exhausted. "What're you doing, Willowpaw? Frostpaw needs her rest if she wants to recover."

Frostpaw sighed loudly and flopped back into her nest. "But it's about the gathering," she whined.

This time, Fawndapple didn't respond. She only bent to sniff the apprentice and scurried to Raggedclaw's resting form.

Willowpaw exchanged a glance with her friend. "Anyway, when do you think you'll be better?"

Frostpaw shrugged. "I'm pretty sure I'll be healthy again in a few sunrises." She snuck a glance at Fawndapple to see if she would correct her.

The medicine cat showed no signs of hearing their conversation at all. Instead she sighed, pawing through her meager supply of catmint.

Willowpaw licked the top of Frostpaw's head. "Okay well try not to die of boredom."

Frostpaw rolled her eyes. "Yeah, I'll try."

Willowpaw left the den and decided to lay down in a patch of sunlight in the center of camp. Her tail flicked idly as she absorbed the few scraps of heat the day had to offer. Leafbare was in full swing and the air carried a sharp bite that had been absent beforehand. She kept expecting to wake up to snow covering camp, but alas, the sky was always clear. It was rare that clouds came, and when they did it was briefly.

"Hello, Willowpaw,"

She looked up to see her father, Oakfur. Warmth sparkled in his eyes. "Hi father!" She stood and nuzzled him.

"I've been so busy lately. We haven't spoken in ages." He sat beside his daughter.

She leaned against her father's shoulder. His brown fur was warm.

"I just got back from a border patrol. ShadowClan hasn't bothered stepping over the scent line. Not after what you did to that

apprentice." He rasped his tongue across Willowpaw's cheek.

Willowpaw shrunk just a bit. The memory was still sensitive but her father's praise filled her with comfort. At least he thought she was a formidable fighter.

"Thanks," she said, looking down at the ground. "So when's the snow going to get here?"

Oakfur's expression darkened. "I... Well I'm sure it's going to arrive soon. Usually the first snow would have come already. But StarClan knows better than we do." He returned to his placid state.

Willowpaw didn't respond immediately. She thought for a moment before speaking. "Is the forest supposed to be this.... Crinkly?"

Oakfur snorted in amusement. "Are you looking for the word dry? And to answer your question, well..." he sighed. "I'll be honest. No. Though I wouldn't be surprised if you woke next sunrise to a powdery morning."

She nodded.

"Willowpaw," her father began, turning to meet her gaze. "I hope you know how much I am proud of you. Your mother and I's heart is still healing from the passing of your siblings and I feel as if because of that we have been neglecting *you*." Genuine guilt shone in his eyes.

"What? No, no you haven't. You've handled it really well." *I think*. She thought. Her lack of experience prevented her from committing whole-heartedly to that statement.

Oakfur sighed. "Well at any rate, I just want to make it up to you. I just feel like I missed a big part of your life, and for that I am truly sorry." He lowered his head.

Willowpaw felt uncomfortable. She had never seen her father so vulnerable – especially in front of her like this. She pressed her head against his shoulder. "It's okay, father. I never thought ill of you because of it."

Her father went limp with relief. He chuckled, "Sorry to come out of nowhere like that. It had been plaguing me for a while and I guess I needed to pluck that tick." He straightened up and his usual even-temperedness returned. "What do you say about hunting? Just me and you."

She brightened and nodded. "That sounds like fun."

*What did you think? Who's your favorite character so far? Comment down below :)*

*Oh and did you catch the reference? It's a bit difficult....*

# Chapter 14 > > Beware

[image]

"If anyone can bring me some catmint, I would be very grateful." Fawndapple said. The shadows behind her eyes had only grown in the past few sunrises. Her apprentice, Pondpaw,  stood by Raggedclaw's nest, tending to the elder's needs.

Sunpaw scoffed. "I could find some with my eyes closed!"

Fawndapple didn't look impressed. She turned back to her duties, leaving the red tom glowing with over-confidence.

His brother narrowed his eyes. "Bet I could find it before you do."

Sunpaw rolled his eyes. "Sure. Want to join the competition, Willowpaw?" She looked over at the tabby, who was standing in the entrance of the medicine den. She had just come in to see Frostpaw.

"What's going on?" She asked.

Both brothers stumbled over each other to explain.

Fawndapple reemerged from the herb stocks. For the first time in a long while, her expression was light. "Whoever can bring me back the most catmint gets a comb of honey." She chuckled at the apprentice's astounded faces.

"Honey! I wish I could participate; I would have kicked your tails." Frostpaw raised her head from where she lay.

"I'll be giving you honey anyway. It helps a sore throat." The medicine cat brushed past the cats again to the rear of the den.

"Not fair!" Sunpaw cried. He lashed his tail in frustration.

Frostpaw glared at him. "Would *you* rather be sick, mousebrain?"

That shut him up.

Willowpaw jumped at the idea of trying honey. She could vaguely recall when she was a kit and had been given the sticky stuff to help her cough. But the taste eluded her.

She finished visiting Frostpaw before meeting the toms in the middle of camp. They had their heads bent together.

"Are we going to work together?" She asked.

Sunpaw gave her a condescending look. "What do you think? I don't know about you, but I want to win."

Willowpaw frowned.

Woodpaw's fur raised at the slight tension. "Uh, I'm going to go inform Birdpaw." He slipped away.

Willowpaw raised her head. "I hope you know that I'm going to win. And then I'm going to split the honey with Frostpaw."

Sunpaw's reaction was priceless. His mouth dropped. "But she already gets honey! That's not fair!"

But she spun on her heel and padded off, waving her tail. She *would* win. If nothing else, then to rub it in that cheeky tom's face. And to cheer Frostpaw up. She would get a laugh out of Sunpaw's defeat.

After a short training session about disguising scent, Willowpaw returned to Frostpaw.

The two sat next to each other, discussing possible catmint niches. Frostpaw used her claw to scratch out a rough map of their territory.

"You see, I'm sure it would grow in a nice shady patch of grass." She studied her sketch.

"Actually, they like full sun." Pondpaw mumbled through a bundle of leaves. Her sudden appearance made Willowpaw jump. The black she-cat laid down her burden and from it, gave her sister two poppy

seeds.

Frostpaw licked them up without comment.

"Really?" Willowpaw asked. She looked at the map. "So, by the old twolegplace would be a good place to start?"

Pondpaw shook her head. "We've looked in the obvious places. Everything we find is already dead."

Willowpaw sighed. *This won't be easy.*

The following day, Willowpaw kept an eye out for the plant. Pondpaw had described its appearance as thoroughly as she could and gave her a few pointers.

*Sharp smelling leaves once you're up close.*

*You're going to want to eat it, but don't.*

*Chances are they aren't blooming, but you might find bright flowers on the stem.*

Repeating the advice in her head, the apprentice checked every mouselength of the ground.

"Willowpaw, it doesn't look like you're hunting." Brightblossom observed, coming over.

"Er, I'm helping Fawndapple look for catmint." Willowpaw felt her eartips redden.

"A noble project, but we're on a hunting patrol. Your duties come first."

Willowpaw nodded and scented the air for prey.

She felt stupid for being caught like that. The leader himself was on this patrol! If he saw her off task, she couldn't imagine his disappointment. After all, any chance she got in Badgerstar's presence was spent trying to impress him. It was irrational, but somewhere in the back of her mind, Willowpaw felt like he would

make her a warrior sooner if she performed well.

The apprentice brushed past a fern and opened her mouth to pick up more scents. She froze when she picked up something that was...different. It smelled faintly of twoleg, but it was smothered. Not natural.

Her heart began to pound against her chest. *Something's not right!*

She dashed back to where everyone had initially branched out and looked around for a warrior. Beeflight and Ashpelt were padding towards her, carrying a scrawny crow between them.

"I smell something weird." She stated, attempting to control her fear.

Ashpelt dropped the kill and lifted his nose to the air. "Twoleg. But old. I wouldn't worry."

Willowpaw nodded, but her spiked fur did not flatten.

"Warriors! I found something worth examining." Badgerstar's voice came from just beyond a wide oak.

Brightblossom stepped out from the trees and joined Ashpelt and Beeflight.

Willowpaw assumed she could go see too, given she was part of this patrol, and followed the warriors.

They met up with Badgerstar by a juniper bush. A dead mouse lay atop a bed of dried leaves. He was craning his head over the animal, sniffing it deeply.

"I don't see any visible injuries on it. Poison maybe?" Beeflight suggested.

Badgerstar narrowed his eyes.

Willowpaw squinted at the dead mouse. She couldn't be the only one with a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach. But a quick glance around told her that she was alone.

She leaned to Brightblossom and spoke quietly, "this doesn't look right. It smells funny."

Her mentor cast a worried glance at the leader. Realization dawned in her eyes.

Everything then happened too quickly to react.

Willowpaw studied the mouse closer and saw a shiny glint from the surrounding leaves. While her mind worked to put the pieces together, Badgerstar took a tentative step forward.

*Snap!*

Two smooth bars sprung from the leaves and clasped around Badgerstar's neck. The tom squawked in surprise and tried to jump away, but wasn't fast enough. He crumpled to the ground.

"Badgerstar!" Brightblossom yowled, just a moment too late.

Willowpaw froze, her blood turning to ice.

*Trap.*

*Badgerstar.*

*Blood.*

---

*Okay, author's note here. So I've been thinking, and I believe that I'll wrap up this story line in one or two books... I originally had over 6 pages of plans for this thing (that involved tragedy, rogue cats, and some meandering...). But its just not juicy enough to hold people's attention. Sometimes I even think this is getting boring to the readers.*

*When I go back and re-edit this, polish it, etc... I think I'll cut some scenes for reading-interest purposes.*

*So what does this mean for the story?*

*Basically, I'm going to start cutting to the chase. About time, right?*

*Besides, I have another book I'm dying to begin writing. Oh, but that doesn't mean I'll be skimping on the rest of this.*

*Maybe one day I can rewrite this to be just as amazing as I had first envisioned.*

*What are your opinions? I'd love to hear what you, the readers, have to say. :3*

# Chapter 15 > > Desperate

[image]

The cats immediately swarmed around their leader. They stared, dumbstruck, at the gasping Badgerstar. He thrashed in the trap, only worsening the grip it had on his neck. He screeched and blood dribbled out of his mouth.

"Hold still!" Ashpelt shouted in his ear. He turned to the others. "Use your claws and try to pry it! There's no time for clever plans!"

Willowpaw finally regained control of her paws and rushed over, eager to help but terrified of the scene up-close. It was much worse than Brightblossom's ordeal. She could see Badgerstar's eyes cloud and unfocus. She saw his labored breathing grow ever shallower.

"Use your strength!!" Ashpelt howled. He grunted and his muscles strained as he pulled at the trap with all his might. Brightblossom and Beeflight followed suit, huffing and puffing.

Willowpaw joined in the corner of the trap, digging her hind paws into the leaves for stability.

"Hang in there, Badgerstar!" Beeflight gasped.

The ThunderClan leader's head went limp and lolled, unconscious.

Willowpaw felt the bars budge and begin to separate. They were so close!

And yet the tom's chest rose and fell less and less until it stopped altogether.

"No!" Brightblossom cried. She gave an extra heave and the trap released the leader's neck. Ashpelt bent down and dragged Badgerstar out from between the glinting bars and laid him down against the juniper bush.

"Is he dead?" Willowpaw breathed. She couldn't tear her eyes away

from the crumpled body of Badgerstar. He looked so fragile and pathetic, legs a tangled heap below him and neck fur ruffled from where it had been ensnared.

Nobody answered her. They were panting and looking on with fear. Their bodies heaved from exertion.

Willowpaw stared at the black tom. He wasn't breathing.

*Is he out of lives? What if he is? Oh StarClan, please, please let him wake up.* She sat there for what felt like forever. Waiting. Watching. Worrying.

Finally, after many a bated breath, Badgerstar's amber eyes fluttered open. He gasped a giant mouthful of air and coughed.

Brightblossom gasped and was at his side in an instant. Ashpelt and Beeflight followed her and helped their leader rise to his paws.

Badgerstar continued taking deep gulps of air. He focused on steadying his trembling legs.

"Are you okay?" Beeflight asked, eyes wide.

Badgerstar caught his breath. "Y-yes." He coughed. "Just give me a moment."

Willowpaw almost went limp with relief. Now *her* legs were shaking.

As she looked over Badgerstar she noticed how weary he looked, life loss aside. Silver hairs streaked his muzzle and his fur was dull, much unlike the younger warriors surrounding him.

Once he had recovered enough to walk, Badgerstar thanked the patrol for their help and reassumed his role.

"Collect your catches and let's get back to camp." He said. His voice was quieter than usual.

As was the patrol's. Few words were said besides that of simple orders.

Willowpaw kept her head down the duration of the return. Her mind buzzed with what just happened. Her *leader* just lost a life! And even worse, she could have spoken up sooner.

Breathe in, breathe out.

*I couldn't have done anything. It's not my fault.* Willowpaw reasoned with herself. To help push it out of her mind, she counted her steps. *One, two, one two...*

As soon as the patrol entered camp, Badgerstar silently made his way to the medicine den. The other warriors branched out and chatted softly with their den-mates, recalling the tale.

Willowpaw chose a nice spot in the gorge and rested while she waited for Badgerstar to take his leave. She wanted to be the first one that told Frostpaw.

*Why didn't the trap patrol find that one?* Part of her mind wondered.

*Because it was well-hidden, duh.* The other half pointed out.

At last, Badgerstar reemerged with Fawndapple at his side. Worry shone in both cats' eyes and they parted with a tense nod.

Willowpaw quickly stood. She trotted to the den, searching for her friend beyond the veiled entrance.

"I'm sorry, but no visitors right now." Fawndapple said. Her voice was distant, her eyes even more so.

Willowpaw opened and closed her mouth. "But...I uh, have to really talk to Frostpaw." She pawed the ground. "It's important."

Fawndapple nodded and padded away. If the apprentice hadn't known any better, she would have thought that Fawndapple was oblivious to the entire conversation.

She darted inside.

Frostpaw spotted her friend and coughed harshly before propping herself up.

"What's going on? Fawndapple wouldn't tell me and Pondpaw left before I could ask her!" Frostpaw whined.

Willowpaw shushed her. "We aren't supposed to know anyway! But where's your sister?" She glanced around the den. No sign of the fluffy black she-cat.

"Pondpaaaaw! My throat huuuurts!" The ginger and white apprentice wailed, throwing her head back.

"Great StarClan, I wonder why," Willowpaw laughed.

Sure enough, Pondpaw appeared with a little honeycomb cradled in her jaws. She narrowed her eyes on seeing the best friends together. After putting down the honeycomb in front of her sister, she said cautiously, "I'm assuming you want to know about what Badgerstar told me." She stared at Willowpaw with a wary look on her face.

Frostpaw didn't seem to notice. "Well of course we do! You ran off and I *know* you heard me calling."

Pondpaw glared. "Well it doesn't concern you, so shove off!" Her unexpected aggressiveness stunned the other two. She instantly shrunk back from her own words. "I'm sorry. It's just – I have to go." She whirled around, ears flattened to her skull.

"Hey!" Frostpaw growled. She lunged forward and bit Pondpaw's tail. The she-cat screeched.

"What was that for, beebrain?" She spat. Her fur was beginning to rise.

Frostpaw hacked before laying back down in her nest. "At least tell me this: how many lives does Badgerstar have left?" Now she was unsettled.

She made sure her mentor wasn't around and lowered her head level with Frostpaw's. "One."

Half of Willowpaw wasn't too surprised. The leader was getting elderly, so it would only be fitting. But her heart told her it wasn't so. The strong wise tom always was there. He was a rock of stability

both for her and the Clan. She couldn't imagine anyone else taking his place.

"*One?*" Frostpaw gasped.

Pondpaw nodded, guilt spreading across her features. "You can't let anyone know that I told you. It's against the medicine cat code to divulge private information like this."

Frostpaw stared blankly at her sister. "Simple words, please?"

Pondpaw rolled her eyes. "I'm not supposed to gossip about the leader of ThunderClan." Her voice carried a hint of condensation.

"You couldn't have just said that?" Frostpaw mumbled. She took a lick of the honeycomb.

Willowpaw kicked Frostpaw for her to shut up. She then spoke up, "We won't. We promise."

*Well, here's a little update to start off the summer! Lots more are on the way.*

*So who's your favorite character so far? Do you have any guesses on what will happen next? I love to hear what you guys think x3*

# Chapter 16 > > A Frightening Encounter

The news of Badgerstar's accident had been heard by every set of ears in all of ThunderClan, passed through whispers.

Even several sunrises later, the warriors were still discussing, in vivid detail, how they had rescued Badgerstar from the deadly trap. Willowpaw had soon grown tired of the cyclic conversation. She didn't need to hear it over and over. Not when it was still quite fresh in her mind.

So continuing her search of catmint seemed like the only reasonable option.

She had already checked the WindClan border for any signs of the elusive herb. Nothing. Though looking back she supposed if the herb *had* been there, it would have been taken already. She had to look where no one else had bothered.

That entailed the ShadowClan border. Willowpaw felt like the two Clans had gotten into enough trouble recently but she had no other choice. Hopefully Sunpaw and Woodpaw hadn't checked there yet.

She turned her paws in the right direction and let her senses bathe in the new forest. New forest as in it looked like a completely different wood. Even a little bit scary... with the lack of snow, there was nothing to brighten the dark trees.

They reached up to the sky, stretching their spindly claw-like branches high. It casted fractured shadows onto the ground, which was spongy with the decomposing leaves. And without their green pelt, the trees became menacing; looming over her and watching.

Willowpaw didn't like this forest. She wanted the old one back, with its warm leaves and rustling branches laden with birds. Not like she saw much of it as a kit but even so it filled her with comfort.

She quickened her pace. Her breath billowed out in front of her nose and was the only sound she could hear in the dead thicket.

A numbing breeze brought with it a familiar yet foreign scent. Willowpaw recognized it instantly from the day Badgerstar lost a life. A trap. Her pawsteps froze and she almost didn't dare to breathe.

*Based on from where the wind blew, it should be* – the air caught in her throat as she saw its evil glint among the leaves. This one was not as well hidden and the bars were easily visible in the sunlight. *What should I do?* Willowpaw fretted. It didn't seem right to leave it just sitting there.

Looking closer, she saw a limp body on the shiny circle in the center. A mouse. Just like last time. Willowpaw was smart enough not to take the bait, but she continued to stare.

Frostpaw's plan came to her mind. If she could just find something heavy enough to trigger the trap then it would be rendered useless.

*But what if...* The thought of her caught reappeared in her thoughts. And here she was, alone. Nobody knew where she was if worse came to worse. The only thing that could come is a slow and painful death, if a fox didn't get her first.

*No.*

Willowpaw knew she had to step up and face her fears. What kind of warrior would she be if she couldn't walk confidently in her own territory?

She conducted a small search for a rock or branch of some kind. Anything to disarm the trap but keep her a good distance away while doing so. The last thing she wanted was to end up like Badgerstar or Brightblossom. At least those two had cats with them to help.

Heart thudding, Willowpaw realized that there was nothing with which to trigger the trap. All the fallen twigs had become brittle and no rocks were to be found.

The slender bars continued to glare at her from beneath the leaf mold.

There was no way she could leave this untouched. Too many accidents have already happened and there could be another if she didn't act *right now*.

"StarClan help me," she said. And without allowing herself to think twice, Willowpaw walked right up to the trap and raised a paw.

*Bad idea, bad idea, bad idea....*

She unsheathed a claw and hovered it right above the round platform atop which the dead mouse rested upon.

*For the good of the Clan. Better me than a capable warrior.*

Willowpaw pressed down on the trigger.

Quick as lightning, she snatched her paw away. As she did so, the slim bars moved at breakneck speed. Just as she thought she was in the safe, they snapped right on her toes.

Her wail echoed through the ghostly trees and into the ground. Sharp, intense pain jolted through her body and she shook her paw to be rid of the trap.

But it was designed for this sort of resistance. It held fast.

"No, no, no... please StarClan, no," she whimpered. *This can't be happening.* She began screeching some more.

"Somebody! Help! Please....!"

The only response was the whistle of the wind against bare branches.

Willowpaw's breath came in short gasps and her large breath clouds turned into small puffs.

*This was such a stupid idea! Why did I even for a moment think it would work?*

She whimpered again and crumpled to the ground. "....help...." Her eyes scrunched shut, trying to block out the throbbing.

*Maybe if I wait long enough, someone will come around? No. I barely know where I am. How is somebody supposed to track me...track me down! That's it!*

Willowpaw was decided. She would just wait until cats started searching for her and were led straight to her predicament. She didn't know how long that would be but the thought was comforting.

*Now,* Willowpaw concluded, *all I have to do is wait.*

Unfortunately she did not have such a luxury.

She smelled it before she heard it. A strange void. Much like how Badgerstar's trap had been initially disguised. Almost like a hole where the forest's scents should be. And it was moving, coming closer. The gap widened until Willowpaw was sure it would swallow her whole.

That's when she heard it. A heavy *thud, thud* that shook the ground and scared crows from their trees.

Willowpaw became frantic again. Clearly there was no time to wait for her clanmates. She had to do something now!

Her toes were still crushed between the bars just as tight as before and struggling did more harm than good.

It had arrived.

Willowpaw felt the ground shake like never before and looked around for the source. A twoleg. Now that it was closer, she could scent the unusual strain of smells drifting from it. In one of its paws it carried some sort of container. With horror, she realized it was feline-sized.

It was coming straight towards the trap but didn't seem to notice her. It continued to walk along in its clumsy gait. She saw it was wearing strange pelts that didn't look like fur. But there was no time

to study the twoleg.

Once again, she tried to pry it open like she had seen it done before, but to no avail. She simply was not strong enough.

The twoleg spotted her. It gave a start, as if it wasn't expecting to see Willowpaw alive. The creature fumbled with the container and a small shiny panel swung open.

It propped it up on one side and picked its way over to Willowpaw.

She hissed at it and flattened her ears. "Go away, foxheart!" She howled.

The twoleg made no indication of hearing her. It bent lower next to Willowpaw and stuck out a pudgy paw.

"Dark Forest take you!" Willowpaw swatted at the paw with her free claws.

It made a sound that sounded like a controlled cough. The corners of its mouth turned upwards. The other pudgy paw snaked out and grabbed her firmly around the scruff.

Willowpaw then realized what deep dung she was in. With its free paw, the twoleg pried open the trap and lifted Willowpaw into the air.

She felt her stomach heave and with all her strength, she flailed her claws, hoping to land a strike somewhere. But the twoleg only held her far from its body leaving the apprentice dangling. It walked over to the container.

*No! I can't be captured by twolegs! Nobody will ever find me. I'll die or worse, become a kittypet!*

Willowpaw had to think, and think very quickly, for she was about to be kidnapped and never seen again.

*Another stupid idea!* This time she held no hesitation.

She raised her forelimbs as high above her head as she could and

sank her claws into the twoleg's paw. Pain lanced up her injured paw but she gritted her teeth to keep from letting go.

The twoleg howled and shook its paw wildly. At this point it all it wanted to do was get rid of the apprentice.

Willowpaw was thrown into the air and gasped as her body hit a tree trunk, knocking the breath from her chest.

Her head screamed at her to get up and run but the pain was staggering.

Meanwhile, the twoleg was making loud noises and grumbling.

Willowpaw braced herself and took off into the forest. She ignored her paw and raced back to camp as fast as she could. Even the wind itself trailed behind the young cat.

*Surely it won't follow me back. If I led it straight to my home, I would be exiled. Disowned.*

She gave an extra burst of speed.

*Almost there.*

By now her lungs ached and pleaded for a rest. Her muscles shrieked in protest with each bound. Most definitely, this was the fastest Willowpaw had ever run in her life. She felt as if she slowed her pace even by a stride, the twoleg would snatch her up again. She could almost feel its footfalls reverberating through the earth.

As the sparse bushes that edged the gorge came into view, Willowpaw allowed herself to slow. She was positive that the twoleg was long gone. It was probably still whimpering about the claw-marks it received.

She burst into camp, attracting many long eyed stares. She realized that this happened more often than it should.

"Are you alright?" Hollyheart padded to meet her daughter and nuzzled her.

Willowpaw was too hyped up to give a coherent answer. She guessed she was wild-eyed and twice her size. She could feel her coat on end.

Hollyheart's expression darkened. "Willowpaw, you look like you just saw Tigerstar himself. What's wrong?"

"Twoleg!" She choked out, feeling the adrenaline begin to die down. Her body burned with overexertion and her paw hurt worse than ever. "Fawndapple," she said.

Hollyheart was horrified. "Fawndapple!" She screeched.

Looking back, Willowpaw understood why her mother was so worried. Hollyheart was afraid of losing her last kit.

The pale she-cat stumbled out of her den. Spare bits of leaves clung to her pelt and through her fur, the sharp outline of her ribs could be seen. Her gaze darted around, trying to find what was wrong. She bundled over.

"Willowpaw, what have you gotten yourself into now?" She said, scanning over the apprentice.

"Twoleg," Willowpaw panted again.

"Do something for StarClan's sake!" Hollyheart growled.

Fawndapple disregarded the queen and draped her tail across Willowpaw's shoulders, leading her to the medicine den. Hollyheart pressed up against her daughter's other side to offer support.

-

Willowpaw lay listlessly across from Frostpaw in the den. Her gaze was fixed straight ahead, unblinking.

Fawndapple hurried over, a bundle of herbs in her jaws, and began to examine Willowpaw. She asked her to bare her teeth in order to check her gums – pale, almost white. The young medicine cat pressed her ear against the apprentice's chest – "Heart's quicker than a hare's."

Hollyheart waited impatiently for the diagnosis. She occasionally flicked her tail and scored the ground.

"Shock." Fawndapple finished. She pushed some leaves in front of Willowpaw and coaxed her to eat the herbs.

"Will she be okay?" Hollyheart asked. Her pelt was beginning to spike.

Fawndapple dipped her head. "Yes. She just needs to be kept warm while she recovers."

The anxious look on Hollyheart's face made Fawndapple add, "she should be okay before sundown."

Hollyheart relaxed and laid down with her daughter, pressing her pelt against Willowpaw's. She rasped her tongue over and over across her ears. Already, Willowpaw began to stop trembling and let the comforting scent of her mother wreath around her.

# Chapter 17 > > Message From the Stars

[image]

Willowpaw knew something was amiss.

Instead of feeling the hard ground of the medicine den beneath her body, a soft and cool earth met her fur. A slight breeze tickled her whiskers.

*I didn't wander off in my sleep, did I?* She opened her eyes.

All around her was a lush forest, filled with the sounds of birds chirping and mice scurrying in the undergrowth. Willowpaw began to realize that she wasn't in ThunderClan territory. The scents were unfamiliar, yet comforting in some way.

She rose to her feet, looking around at this strange land. Her paws, as if of their own accord began to lead her through the tall grasses. With a jolt of realization, Willowpaw felt the pain in her paw had left her.

"Do you know where you are?" Willowpaw hadn't heard another set of pawsteps join her.

She glanced over her shoulder. "StarClan!! I- you!" Her mouth fumbled for words upon the sight of the cat by her side. It was none other than Firestar, his flame-colored pelt sparkling with countless stars.

Willowpaw's mind reeled. *What do I say? Why am I here? Wait... what's going on?*

Firestar halted and dipped his head. "Well, yes. You *are* in StarClan." His eyes glimmered with amusement.

Willowpaw felt her ear tips redden and she dipped her head low. "It's an honor to meet you," she said evenly. But on the inside, she was still imploding with awe.

"I can say the same Willowpaw. As you may have guessed by now, we have been watching over you. It is no mistake that you found yourself here." He padded forward and beckoned with his tail. "Please, follow me."

Willowpaw nodded mutely. *Watching over me? Honor to meet me? Wait until Frostpaw hears about this!* She followed the tom up a gentle incline. Countless questions rose to her tongue. So many stories she wanted to hear. So many adventures.

"It's no secret that your forest is drying up." Firestar began. "What you probably don't predict is for disaster to ensue."

The apprentice's blood ran cold. "What?"

Firestar shook his head.

The trees thinned until they were left atop a cliff, overlooking the expanse of StarClan's territory. Rolling hills and dales speckled the land, cut through by gleaming creeks. Willowpaw couldn't help but gasp. It was all so beautiful. So serene. As if a queen had carefully placed every blade of grass  in order to create a perfect haven for her kits. It brought water to the young cat's eyes.

Firestar swept his gaze across before returning it to Willowpaw. "Young one, there is a great danger coming." His previously soft eyes were now steely. "One that could threaten all the Clans."

Willowpaw met his gaze with confusion. *Why is Firestar telling me this...?* She had an inkling of an idea but it made no sense. "What's going on?" She whispered.

The orange tom studied Willowpaw's expression. "I believe you already know. It was no mistake you were chosen for this." He paused, as if wanting to say more. Instead of continuing he swept his tail across the grass.

The beautiful scene dissolved into gray mist. It swirled, disorienting

Willowpaw until she wasn't sure anymore of which way was up or down. Only the dull glow from beside her announced Firestar's presence.

Willowpaw's stomach flew into her throat as she plummeted down, down. No more was she encased in a heavy cloud. Instead she found herself approaching the lake territory from above, and gaining speed with every heartbeat.

Her eyes drunk in the image; the lake overflowing with sickly gray water. The once proud trees were now stripped of their leaves, splintered branches strewn across the floor.

As the apprentice continued her freefall, she flailed her paws wildly. A silent screech choked her breath.

To her horror, she realized a good part of the woods was broken. Even the great pines lay discarded on the ground like a messy kit's playthings.

The lake approached faster and faster, its churning depths just waiting for its next meal only fox-lengths away. Right before her body slammed into the water, everything went black. Willowpaw couldn't feel anything under her paws.

By now, she just wanted to wake up. This wasn't her definition of fun.

"Willowpaw." A voice thundered around her. She recognized it as Firestar's, but could not see him anywhere.

She called out to him in vain. *If he wanted me to see him, he would have appeared,* she reasoned.

"The storm will twist the weeping tree. Only if it allows the stricken flower to bloom will the forest prevail.."

Despite the circumstances, Willowpaw felt a bubble of excitement. Those twisting words sounded like a prophecy. *And I must be involved, right?*

Firestar appeared from the void. Warmth lit his eyes as he touched

his nose to Willowpaw's.

Then once again, nothing.

--

Gasping, Willowpaw awoke. Leaves were stuck in her pelt and her nest was scattered about the den.

Pondpaw lifted her head from the far end of the den. "I didn't want to wake you up, but you seemed pretty frightened." Her amber eyes flashed with concern. "Is everything alright?"

Willowpaw opened her mouth to speak. She didn't know whether or not to tell Pondpaw of Firestar's warning. *I can trust her, right?*

"Yeah, just a bad dream." The lie burned her tongue but Willowpaw knew Frostpaw should be first to know.

"Frostpaw," She whispered to her friend, nudging her.

The white and ginger apprentice grunted. "Go away."

"This is really important." Willowpaw prayed to StarClan that Frostpaw wouldn't make a fuss.

She didn't know how to handle the prophecy. She didn't even know how to feel about it. On one paw, she was honored to have been singled out by such a legendary warrior. But on the other paw, she was terrified of what it entailed. After all, the ravaged scene of the lake sent her spiraling into anxiety.

*Is it up to me to save the whole forest?*

*How can I fight something if I don't know what it is? I'm not even good at fighting!*

And so she breathed a sigh of relief as Frostpaw grumbled and stumbled to her feet.

Pondpaw glanced over from organizing herbs, suspicion lighting her eyes.

Willowpaw hissed for her to follow and scurried out of the den.

The young ginger and white apprentice's eyes grew wider and wider with each heartbeat until Willowpaw thought they would pop out from awe. By the end of her story, Frostpaw shook her head slowly in disbelief.

"Wow," She breathed.

The two apprentices sat in silence for several moments.

"Firestar?" Frostpaw whispered.

"Yep,"

"This is a real prophecy, isn't it." A statement, not a question.

"Yep," Willowpaw repeated.

They stared off into the distance for a while longer.

Eventually, Willowpaw looked over at her friend. A steady fire burned in her green eyes. "Well if there's anyone I want to be at my side, it's you. 'Cause we're in this together, right?"

Frostpaw shot a sarcastic look at the tabby. "Nah, I'm just going ignore you and hang out with Birdpaw." At Willowpaw's shocked expression, she head butted her. "It's called sarcasm, you mouse-brain."

Willowpaw purred in amusement. "Was it really necessary? You scared me out of my fur for a moment there."

"Come on, furball. We should catch some prey before heading back to camp." Frostpaw gave a weak cough before taking the lead and padding into the forest.

*What do you think of the prophecy? I don't know if it is too easy to guess or otherwise, considering it's my first time writing one. So let me know what you all think. :3*

# Chapter 18 > > Expedition

[image]

Willowpaw walked with a shadow in her eyes since the dream. It hung heavy over her features and weighed on her mind. While her Clanmates carried on with day to day life, the apprentice couldn't help but see the devastated landscape in her mind. Where the bare trees stand, proudly reaching their branches to the sky, soon would be ruined. The mild sky, gray and churning. Everywhere she looked, she saw slivers of the future.

And frankly, it scared her.

A quarter moon later, Willowpaw found herself following Woodpaw to the ShadowClan border.

They made good pace, winding through the skeletal figures of bushes and avoiding the tree roots that stuck haphazardly out of the ground.

"Where exactly are we going?" Willowpaw asked for the third time. Her patience was wearing thin with the brown tom, who refused to give her a straight answer.

"You'll see."

She rolled her eyes. "Why did I even come with you," She mumbled .

Woodpaw gave no indication he heard her, eventually turning North on approaching the scent markers.

Realization began to dawn on Willowpaw as she remembered the route.

*The tunnels!*

She was right.

Woodpaw slowed to a stop in front of the tunnel entrance. He spun around, eyes bright with pride. "I have an idea! There's probably catmint outside Clan territory. And if we find it, Badgerstar might make us warriors early!"

Willowpaw nodded. It was a good plan. "So why didn't you bring your brother?"

Woodpaw's mouth dropped open. "You're kidding, right? All he ever does is brag. When his brother and a *she-cat* find catmint first, it ought to shut him up for a while."

She didn't know how to feel about being just '*a she-cat'* but shrugged it off.

She let Woodpaw lead the way through the cramped tunnel, only stopping a couple times to soothe her rapid breaths. About halfway through the trek, a low groan sounded from the depths of the tunnel, raising all the fur along her spine and sending ice down her veins. Woodpaw heard it too and picked up the pace.

The tunnel made no move to endanger them though, letting the apprentices exit without trouble. Once out, they sniffed around for the elusive herb.

Willowpaw followed a small trail, hoping some catmint grew along its worn edges. It never occurred to her that some creature must have worn down the grass in order to create the path.

"This looks promising!" Woodpaw said, appearing at her shoulder.

Willowpaw jumped and gave a low hiss. "Yeah." She attempted to flatten down her fur, pausing and rasping at her chest.

Beside her, the brown tom gave a small gasp. A clump of strong-smelling foliage lay just up ahead. It was partially sheltered by a strong oak's branches and was wedged between its trunk and brambles.

"Catmint!" Woodpaw sped forward, breathing in its sharp tang.

Willowpaw joined more slowly, marveling at their sheer luck in

finding the herb. With this much, they would have enough for the entire camp. She wondered if taking catmint before becoming ill would prevent it.

She joined Woodpaw in uprooting the plants, helping dislodge dirt from the roots. Soon they had gathered every stem into a neat pile.

"Let's split the load and head back." Woodpaw's authoritative tone contradicted with the gleam in his eyes.

Willowpaw nodded and clasped her share gently between her jaws. She was more than glad to be leaving the unknown territory. Without the familiar ThunderClan scent permeating each blade of grass, every shadow threatened to hide some beast. Recognizable landmarks, nowhere to be found. Lost in a sea of green.

Fortunately the tunnel was nearby. The two had to shuffle awkwardly to accommodate for the catmint. At one point Willowpaw got stuck at the tunnel's narrowest, forcing her to tilt her head and become as small as possible.

When they returned, the camp was nearly empty, save for the elders and medicine cats. Their paw steps echoed off the gorge walls, alerting the rest of the Clan of their presence.

"Guess what we found!" Woodpaw announced, strutting into the medicine den. He let the bundle fall from his jaws.

Fawndapple's head shot up from where she was laying. Willowpaw noticed the young medicine cat looked more aged and her fur was ungroomed. Her green eyes were dull.

But upon seeing all the catmint, a rare light entered her eyes. She fumbled for words. "W-wow! Where did you find all this?" She padded up and opened her jaws to inhale its scent.

Woodpaw froze for a moment, shooting a warning glance at Willowpaw. "Er, it was North of here, at the far edge of our territory." It wasn't a complete lie. Just not the whole truth.

Fawndapple pawed at the roots. They were splayed like countless tiny mouse whiskers. "In the future, only take *some* of the plant. If

you destroy the roots, it won't be able to grow back."

"Oops." The apprentices said. Willowpaw felt hot guilt burn her ear tips. *I should have known that.*

"It's okay though. This should be enough until the next catmint sprouts." Fawndapple quickly reassured them. "And I suppose you've earned that honeycomb." Her whiskers quivered in amusement.

The two exchanged an excited glance. Fawndapple reappeared with a small dripping comb and set it down on a bay leaf. Willowpaw was first to pad over and lap. She was surprised at how thick the honey was, and how tasteless.

Fawndapple watched with a light expression. "What do you think?"

Willowpaw licked her lips. "It's...different. But not bad." The sticky honey made it hard to speak. Woodpaw nodded, bending his head to lap more.

Pondpaw entered the den with moss in her jaws. She narrowed her eyes at the two apprentices and gave her bundle to Fawndapple, who disappeared to deposit it in storage.

"What's with all the dirt in your fur?" She whispered.

They froze again, minds reeling to come with some excuse.

"Uh, it's--" Willowpaw started.

"We fell down trying to carry the catmint." Woodpaw blurted. He lowered his head to hide his guilty expression.

Pondpaw wasn't convinced but did not press further. She only flicked her tail and left to join Fawndapple in the back.

Later that day when the dawn patrols began to return, Woodpaw made it his job to taunt his brother endlessly. Initially, Sunpaw had been both shocked and jealous. But after so long of Woodpaw's jeers, the red tom just became annoyed.

"All right, furball," Willowpaw heard him say that evening. "I'm

*amazed* at your cleverness! I can't believe you thought to use the tunnel *I* discovered."

Meanwhile, Frostpaw was proud of her friend. "You showed that braggart!" She had grinned.

Once the commotion had died down for the day and the waxing moon peeked over the tips of the trees, Willowpaw felt a restlessness in her paws. Sleep would not come to her yet. While the other apprentices settled down for the night, she had the urge to take a walk. Alone.

Her thoughts were threatening to drown her, and it was time she learned how to swim.

She found herself at the edge of the lake. The water lapped gently around her paws, silver from the moonlight. A bone-chilling breeze ruffled her pelt, sending the skeletal trees' branches rattling like bones. Despite the cold, Willowpaw did not shiver. She only sat there, staring up at the glittering stars overhead.

*Oh, StarClan...Of all the capable cats, you choose me?* She trusted their reasons for selecting her, but it just seemed so bizarre. *Sootclaw would have been a much wiser choice. Or Scarletfang. What do I have that they don't?*

*The storm will twist the weeping tree...only if the stricken flower is allowed to bloom will the forest prevail...*

"How is that supposed to make sense?" Willowpaw muttered angrily. "It's just a jumble of words!" She kicked a pebble hard and sent it flying into the lake. It landed with a splash, sending ripples across its glassy surface.

"How am I supposed to do this?" She crouched into a ball, wrapping her tail tightly around her wet paws. Everything just seemed so big, and her so small.

The combination of icy water and worried thoughts made Willowpaw start to shiver. It started as a tingle in her fur and then progressed to uncontrollable shaking.

And there Willowpaw lay, a prisoner to her own thoughts, on the lake's shore.

# Chapter 19 > > Good News and Bad News

[image]

Through her haze, a vague voice entered her mind.

"Willowpaw! Do I need to fetch Fawndapple? Willowpaw!"

Sky blue eyes, tinted with worry.

She shook her head. She felt as if she was floating outside her body.

Fear-scent entered her nose, sharp and bitter.

"Look at me, Willowpaw! Can you look at me?"

It took all the strength she had to meet the cat's gaze.

"Good. Just focus on my eyes. Are you okay?"

Willowpaw did not know how to respond. The truth? Or a lie? *I don't think I could lie my way out of this.*

She shook her head again. Almost at once, she felt a warm pelt at her side. The cat's scent swept around her and she recognized it instantly.

"Sunpaw?" She mumbled.

The tom nodded, and the two stayed there until Willowpaw's panic subsided.

It was like a heavy fog slowly being lifted and she felt clarity return to her mind after some time. She became aware that Sunpaw was still there, flanks rising and falling steadily

"Sunpaw?" She called shakily.

He lifted his head. "Yes? Are you feeling better?" His voice was tight with concern.

"I am. Thank you." Willowpaw said. She noticed that the tom had dragged her further up the shore, out of the water's reach.

Sunpaw shifted so he wasn't pressing against Willowpaw anymore. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to." He said, breaking the silence. "But if you do, I will listen."

Willowpaw took a deep breath. She had sunk under the waves that time. *I need to learn how to deal with this.* She would rather have told Brightblossom or Frostpaw, but Willowpaw could not bear it any longer. She just needed to tell *somebody*.

And so she did.

Willowpaw began with the death of Jaykit and Pouncekit, and how it had been silently weighing on her for moons. The state her mother had sunken into since. The ever-present fear of traps. The secret of the tunnels. The drought.

All the while, Sunpaw listened. He nodded for Willowpaw to continue when she hesitated and agreed when Willowpaw became distraught.

Finally, she came to the prophecy. She paused, unsure if she should really be telling the young tom all of this. *If I really want to ease this burden, I have to include* everything.

Willowpaw slowly recalled the events of her dream as she did with Frostpaw, feeling uncomfortably self conscious. *Will he think I'm crazy? What if he makes fun of me?*

When she had at last finished, it seemed as though a tree had been lifted off her shoulders. She glanced over at Sunpaw, who had a shocked expression on his face.

"Are...you being serious?" He breathed.

Willowpaw felt a spark of anger. "Why would I be making this up?" She lashed her tail irritably.

Sunpaw quickly shook his head. "That's not what I meant. It's just.... This is a big deal and I'm surprised..." He trailed off, casting a guilty look at Willowpaw.

She sighed. "It's okay, I know what you mean. That's another reason why I'm so distraught. I have no idea why they wanted *me* to receive this prophecy." She rested her head on her paws.

He patted her shoulder awkwardly with his paw. "I'm sure it was for a good reason. You just have to trust StarClan."

He had echoed her thoughts exactly. Willowpaw nodded, letting her eyelids flutter down. "You promise you won't tell *anybody?*" There was a threatening undertone to her question.

"You have my word."

There was a nudge at her flank. "Er, you can't stay out here."

Willowpaw sighed, heaving herself to her paws. She noticed her legs were still shaky. Sunpaw did too, and helped support her.

"Thanks," she mumbled. Some part of her pride was suffering, having another cat see her so vulnerable.

Sunpaw shrugged. "Yeah, no problem."

Willowpaw locked her gaze on the ground. "No," she lowered her voice. "Thank you for helping me, listening to me... You really didn't have to do that."

The red tom continued to help her back to camp. "Well, I couldn't just leave you there," he sniffed in amusement. "But seriously, if you ever need to talk again, I, uh.. I'll be here."

They continued in a comfortable silence, each reflecting on their own thoughts.

*Sunpaw could possibly be just the cat I need.* Willowpaw realized. *I could talk things out before they overwhelm me.* The notion lifted her spirits. *After all, he did offer.*

When they arrived back, the two quickly retreated to their den. ThunderClan camp was silent, broken only by the occasional snore. *How long was I out?* A glance up at the moon told her. Half the night.

Soon enough, the entire camp was asleep. And Willowpaw rested easy, for the first time moons.

---

Chilling winds heralded the bitter leaf-bare weather. It brought itself upon the Clans, turning grass thorny and the earth firm. Apprentices and warriors alike turned their heads skyward in hopes to find flakes of snow falling.

The lake had shrunk, leaving behind freezing cracked earth. At the most recent Gathering, the leaders discussed the state of their Clans. It was not pleasant. The prey and water shortage made for frayed tempers. The only progress they made was agreeing that the lake was to be neutral territory.

All the while Willowpaw looked on with dismay. Her Clan, her family, was struggling with the lack of water. Several trips each day had to be made for collecting, using vital warriors that otherwise were needed to hunt.

---

Midway through leaf-bare, Willowpaw was awoken by excited gasps and chatter. She saw all the apprentices clustered at the entrance to the den, clambering for a view outside.

"What's going on?" She blinked sleep from her eyes and joined the cats.

Birdpaw was at the front of the cluster, looking on with amazement. It was Woodpaw who answered.

"Snow! Willowpaw can you believe it?" He bounced on his paws.

Frostpaw met her friend and led her next to the others.

What met the gray tabby's gaze was an image she would remember for seasons to come. Her first snow. Given, it was only several pawfuls of lazy flakes, her excitement overwhelmed any previous expectations. She pushed through the others and burst into the camp.

A very thin layer of snow dusted the ground, cushioning her paws. She relished the cold touch as several flakes met her nose and fell upon her fur. Willowpaw turned to her friends, who watched with amazement.

"You look like you have stars in your fur!" Woodpaw called out.

Frostpaw screwed up her nose and stomped up to Willowpaw. "I can be a StarClan cat too!" she said indignantly.

Sunpaw stared for a heartbeat longer then joined the two, closely followed by Woodpaw. Birdpaw reluctantly copied the rest. Willowpaw was surprised to notice a light hearted joy in the dark she-cat's eyes.

The five frolicked around the gorge until the warriors began to assemble dawn patrols. By then, their paws felt frozen solid.

While out patrolling the WindClan edge of the border, Driftbreeze spoke up. "I have noticed a decrease in the number of traps on our territory." The deputy swept her gaze around the undergrowth. "Perhaps the twolegs have tired?"

Her words made the rest of the patrol wear thoughtful expressions.

"I believe you're right." Brightblossom mewed. Her mismatched eyes flashed in relief.

"But does that mean the other Clans still suffer from them?" Beeflight flicked his tail.

After some discussion, they came to the agreement of telling Badgerstar the news.

He had dipped his head for several moments. His weary frame drew in a deep breath. "Such news is like a ray of light in the darkness.

Thank you." The old leader rose to all fours. "I will make a note of announcing this at the next Gathering. Hopefully this is the end of our trap trouble."

As Brightblossom and the others turned to leave, Badgerstar called behind them, "Organize a trap patrol to check, just to be safe."

Driftbreeze had a meager pool to select from. Many of the warriors were already out hunting or collecting water. And the others had just returned from their dawn patrols. She sighed.

"Scarletfang. I want you, Willowpaw, Birdpaw and Ashpelt to scout the territory and check for traps. As always, take upmost caution."

Though the gray apprentice had just been with the deputy's patrol, she relished the thought of returning to the forest. Snow still formed a thin layer on the ground that Willowpaw was more than happy to trod through.

And by the time they arrived back at camp, their moods were considerably lighter then when they had left.

"Only one." Driftbreeze proudly reported. A murmur of approval rippled through the camp.

Willowpaw padded up to Birdpaw. The dark gray apprentice made no acknowledgement of her approach. "Hey," Willowpaw said.

Birdpaw met her eyes, amber against green. "What?"

Willowpaw inwardly sighed. *She is not easy to talk to...* "It's great that the traps are going away." She watched the apprentice from the corner of her eyes.

"Yeah." Birdpaw kept her face forward.

A flash of irritation struck Willowpaw. *I don't know why she is so stand offish to me.* It became her goal to fix that.

"Want to share a mouse with me? I'm starving." Willowpaw gave an exaggerated sigh and nodded towards the fresh-kill pile.

Birdpaw shrugged. "Fine."

The gray tabby bit back a remark and padded up to the meager prey pile, taking a medium sized piece. She led Birdpaw to a sunny spot in the camp. Both of them fluffed out their pelts to absorb the last of the weak rays the sun offered before sinking below the treetops.

Birdpaw was quiet as she ate.

"So, how's your training going?" Willowpaw asked between bites. It took all her willpower not to swipe at Birdpaw's ears for being so stiff.

"Good. My assessment is coming up." She kept her eyes downwards.

*Wow, a full sentence.* Willowpaw thought bitterly. *That's progress.*

"Oh really? That must mean Sunpaw and Woodpaw's is too." Willowpaw chewed thoughtfully. *Sunpaw, a warrior? He's such a mousebrain.* She *mrrowed* to herself.

Birdpaw shot her a glare.

"I'm sure you'll do just fine." Willowpaw said.

"Yeah." Birdpaw swiped her tongue over her whiskers and stood. Without another word, she padded over to the apprentices' den and vanished.

"Furball." Willowpaw muttered.

# Chapter 20 > > Rendezvous

Badgerstar stood proudly atop the highrock, his warm amber eyes sweeping over the assembled cats.

Sunpaw, Birdpaw, and Woodpaw sat proudly in the front of the crowd, chests puffed up with excitement. Their parents busied around them, murmuring praises and sharing nuzzles.

Just earlier that day, the three apprentices completed their warrior assessment with 'flying colors', according to Sunpaw. Willowpaw barely had a chance to speak to them about the details before Badgerstar called a meeting. She guessed it was a good morale boost for the Clan. Lately the patrols had been returning empty-pawed, claiming the drought and cold had scared all the prey deep into their burrows. The lack of food and water sent many worrying and the others irritable.

"Cats of ThunderClan," Badgerstar began, walking down the slope to meet the rest of the Clan. "It is with great pleasure that I announce the naming of three apprentices."

Willowpaw shifted from her space beside Frostpaw. "This is so exciting!" She whispered.

Frostpaw sniffed. "I'd rather it be us up there."

Brightblossom turned her head and signaled for silence.

The great black and white cat stood in front of the soon-to-be warriors. "In these hard times, we must always look to see the light. We have prevailed before, and we will do so again." He raised his voice so it echoed throughout the camp. "And so I, Badgerstar, leader of ThunderClan call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices. They have learned the ways of your noble code and I commend them as a warrior in their turn."

He locked eyes with Sunpaw. The young tom kneaded the ground. "Sunpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code, and protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do." No hesitation.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Sunpaw, you shall now be known as Sunstrike. StarClan honors your strength and spirit, and welcomes you as a full warrior of ThunderClan." Badgerstar touched his nose with Sunstrike's forehead before turning to his brother.

The same ceremony was repeated. "...Woodpaw, you shall now be known as Woodclaw. StarClan honors your loyalty and determination..."

Birdpaw received her name as well: Birdeye.

At the end of all threes' ceremony, the Clan cheered. "Sunstrike! Woodclaw! Birdeye!" They swarmed around the new warriors, exchanging kind words.

A weary look returned to Badgerstar's eyes. "Fernbelly, could you lead a hunting patrol?"

The white and black she-cat gave a nod and assembled a small group.

After Willowpaw and Frostpaw finished cheering, Willowpaw led her friend away from the crowd. Once they were out of earshot from the Clan, she whispered, "I was thinking-"

Frostpaw gave her a friendly nudge. "Oh boy."

"I'm being serious." Willowpaw fixed Frostpaw with a pleading stare. "I sorta told Sunpaw- I mean Sunstrike, about the prophecy and I think--"

"You what?!" Frostpaw hissed. Her ice blue eyes widened in dismay. "That's supposed to be a secret!"

"Is it? I mean... it... It was weighing on me and it felt good to tell

someone else." She felt her ear-tips begin to burn. She had neglected to tell Frostpaw about the incident by the lake.

Frostpaw gave a snort of disapproval but said nothing more.

Willowpaw continued. "Anyway, since he knows now, I think we should all try to figure out what it means. Three heads are better than one." She didn't dare meet Frostpaw's eyes. But she could feel them burning a hole in her head.

"I can't believe you told Sunstrike..." She muttered. "But you're right, I guess. Tomorrow night?"

Willowpaw nodded. The new warriors' silent vigil wouldn't allow them to meet.

After bidding her friend goodbye, she headed toward the apprentices' den. On her way there, she caught Suntrike's eye from his position by the camp entrance. She mewed a congratulations, but he returned it with only a small dip of his head.

When it occurred to her; the den was about to get much colder.

--

The following sunset, Frostpaw and Willowpaw were camped across from the fresh-kill pile, watching the patrols return to camp. That day's bounty consisted of a scrawny blackbird and an old mouse. One of which was given to the elders, and the other was split between several warriors, Sunstrike being one of them.

The red tom was crouched beside Larksong and his former mentor, Beeflight, along with his brother and Birdeye. Mirth brightened their features as they chatted.

"Look at them," Frostpaw muttered. She narrowed her eyes. "I bet you a piece of fresh-kill that they've forgotten about us already."

"They're just excited about being new warriors, that's all." Willowpaw said. She knew Sunstrike wouldn't just turn his back on her. *On us!* She corrected herself sternly. When Frostpaw didn't look convinced, Willowpaw added, "Hey, we'll be there soon. Our

assessment should be only a moon or two away."

Frostpaw flopped down. "It can't come quick enough."

Pondpaw emerged from the medicine den looking tired. She quivered her tail at the sight of her sister, and friend. Trotting over, she mewed a hello. The two greeted her without much enthusiasm.

"Thanks again for finding that catmint with Woodclaw." She told Willowpaw. "We were able to treat Shimmerpelt before she became too sick."

The gray apprentice kept her gaze fixed on Sunstrike. Waiting. She barely heard Pondpaw's comment. "You're welcome but it was Woodclaw's idea."

Pondpaw turned to her sister. "How's warrior training going? Is the weather making things difficult?"

Frostpaw shrugged. "Not really. The cold ground just makes falls hurt more. Medicine stuff must be so much easier." She rolled onto her side and gave a huge yawn.

Pondpaw shook her head rapidly. "I doubt it--"

Willowpaw watched as Sunstrike and the others stood and headed separate ways. *Now!*

"—Fawndapple has me working to the bone. But I don't mind because--"

Willowpaw kicked Frostpaw to follow and dashed away. Frostpaw gratefully took the chance and was right behind her friend, without as much as a goodbye to her sister.

She caught the new warrior right before he entered his den. Woodclaw was chatting behind him. "Sunstrike," she whispered. "We need to talk." Her tone was urgent.

Woodclaw in tow, the toms followed Willowpaw to the side of the camp. Her heart dropped when she realized the red tom was not alone.

"We wanted to talk to *Sunstrike*." Frostpaw pointed out.

Woodclaw looked hurt. Sunstrike was quick to intervene. "You should show more respect to your elders. We are warriors, after all." He said, unable to keep the amusement out of his voice.

Frostpaw glared at him. "*Elders?* You're not even a season older than us!" Her fur began to bristle.

With a sigh, Willowpaw spoke up. "Enough. Woodclaw can be involved too."

Sunstrike sat on his haunches and gave a paw several swipes of his tongue. "Now what could be so important you'd kick out my brother?" He locked eyes with Willowpaw. She tried to convey the importance of the situation. A spark of understanding flashed in his blue depths.

"Maybe they want some help training." Woodclaw gave his brother a playful shove. Sunstrike did not reciprocate. Instead, he looked down at his paws.

"Follow me." Willowpaw said. She padded out of camp, not bothering to check if the others were trailing.

Frostpaw caught up to her friend. "Woodclaw now too? Who else are you going to tell, Birdeye?"

Willowpaw paid her no mind. "Why do you care? It's *my* prophecy." She was surprised at the sharpness of her own comment.

Frostpaw was too, for she was at a loss for words. *That's the longest she's gone without a retort.*

"...But it's supposed to be our secret..." It was a half-hearted protest.

Willowpaw did not respond. Instead, she kept to the shadows cast by the rising moon, leading them to a spot where she knew guaranteed privacy. The abandoned twolegplace.

A set of pawsteps grew louder, and Woodclaw was by her side. "Can you please tell me what's going on? Sunstrike won't say a word."

The gray apprentice shook her head. "Not until we get somewhere private."

The new warrior snorted. "As if the forest isn't private enough!"

The rest of the trek was silent. The toms knew they weren't getting information out of Willowpaw just yet, and Frostpaw still seemed miffed.

At last, the outline of the abandoned twoleg den came into view, dark against the moonlit sky. Willowpaw led the three of them inside. She stepped carefully over the uneven ground and tasted the air. They were alone.

The tabby sat and wrapped her tail neatly over her paws. The other cats formed a semicircle, their eyes flashing in the darkness.

"Are you going to tell me now?" Woodclaw asked, disgruntled. Sunstrike and Frostpaw turned to face their friend.

She took a deep breath, letting the crisp air fill her chest then softly exhaling it. A cloud billowed around her mouth. Meeting Woodclaw's eyes, she began with her dream.

As she told her story the moon rose higher into the sky, washing out the light of the stars with its own. Wind swayed the tops of the trees and occasionally sent crows into the night.

Willowpaw wrapped it up with stating that she and the others had no clue as to what the prophecy meant. And that they should probably figure it out soon.

The big brown tom nodded slowly. His yellow eyes aimed downward, putting together what he had heard.

Willowpaw cleared her throat. "So I just wanted to get everyone together and try to see what we can make of it. Any --"

"And you didn't think of telling me, the future medicine cat."

The cats started. They frantically searched for the intruder. A patch of shadows behind Sunstrike shifted, and Pondpaw emerged.

She looked less than happy.

*Long time, no see! With my classes beginning this Wednesday, I've been running around like a fox in a fit trying to get my stuff together. And while I didn't quite meet the whole 'finish this before end of summer', I'm pretty close.*

# Chapter 21 >>Speculation & Doubt

A mixture of hurt and anger shone in Pondpaw's copper eyes. They glistened, making the apprentice blink and turn her head. "I'm your sister!" She was referring to Frostpaw.

The white and ginger cat ducked her head. "I'm sorry, it's just-"

"—no! You've treated me like crowfood for so long! Since our training began, I can count on one paw the number of times we've talked. The only time we held conversation was when you were confined to the medicine den! And now you blatantly exclude me from everything you do." Pondpaw's ears were flat against her head as she trembled.

"I feel like I don't have a sister. No, you've got Willowpaw for that. And a prophecy! I'm trained to interpret messages! You..." She hung her head low, unable to continue.

Sunstrike and Woodclaw exchanged a wide-eyed glance.

The air was tight with tension. Frostpaw didn't dare look at her sister. Her voice came out as a whisper. "I'm sorry."

Willowpaw saw the glistening of her friend's eyes.

Pondpaw shook her head. She sniffled.

Fur swished and Frostpaw pressed herself against Pondpaw. "I really am. I guess I just overlooked you since you've become a medicine cat." She still kept her face pointed downward.

Pondpaw took a deep breath. "Yeah."

A lull in the conversation.

Willowpaw felt the need to speak up. "I'm sorry too, Pondpaw. I

know Frostpaw isn't entirely to blame." She shuffled her paws. "Do you want to stick around with us?"

Sunstrike looked as if he wanted to protest, but the gray apprentice silenced him with a glare.

Pondpaw raised her head, blinking. "Of course I do."

"Great. I'm sure you overheard the prophecy, so do you have any ideas?" Willowpaw studied the group's thoughtful expression. Surely with this many cats, they would be able to put together a reasonable theory?

Pondpaw looked off into the distance, head tilted to the side. "Well I remember Fawndapple mentioning 'a weeping tree' before. It was a willow."

Shock flashed through the expressions of all the cats except Willowpaw. *I kind of assumed it was about me. But this reaffirms it.* She nodded slowly.

"What makes you so special?" Woodclaw asked, not unkindly. The glare from Frostpaw and Sunstrike made him add, "No offense or anything. I'm just asking a valid question."

Willowpaw shrugged. "I often wonder too. But that's not the point right now. What do you think the rest means?"

The cats became quiet except for Sunstrike, who whispered the words to himself. "...stricken flower...stricken...strike." He looked up sharply at the realization. He was met with the surprised faces of his friends.

"You're part of it too." Woodclaw murmured.

Sunstrike was more than elated with his discovery.

Willowpaw blinked. *Why didn't I guess that sooner?*

"Wait a moment." Woodclaw's face lit up. "Tree! Wood! If you take out the 'weeping' part, 'tree' could refer to me!" He bounced on his paws.

Sunstrike nodded enthusiastically.

But Willowpaw wasn't convinced. She was about to say something when a thought crossed her mind. *Maybe Woodclaw isn't involved at all.* She could imagine Woodclaw's disappointment. *Best to leave sleeping cats lie.*

She mewed an agreement.

Meanwhile, Frostpaw remained unusually silent. "What do you think?" Willowpaw offered her friend.

The white and ginger apprentice raised her head for the first time since Pondpaw joined. "I don't know."

Pondpaw blinked thoughtfully. "*The storm will twist the weeping tree.* How will a storm twist Willowpaw?"

Woodclaw gasped. He flattened his ears against his skull. "It doesn't mean Willowpaw will *die* does it?" He turned to Willowpaw.

A sinking feeling lowered itself over Willowpaw. *Could that really be the meaning?* She met Woodclaw's yellow eyes with her own somber green ones. "Do you really think that?" She whispered.

Woodclaw glanced over at Pondpaw, who shrugged. "I- I mean, nothing is clear right now. Anything is possible." He flinched as Willowpaw shrunk lower to the ground.

"Enough of this, what about the part about the forest prevailing?" Sunstrike loudly changed the topic. Woodclaw eagerly thought about it.

The cats continued to toss ideas around. Some had substance but many were wild conjectures. Woodclaw even suggested that a storm of badgers would rain over the forest and only if the Clans hid in the trees would they be safe.

"That's even stupider than I expected." Frostpaw had grumbled.

The lowering of the moon brought an end to the secret meeting. Willowpaw tried to review the few facts they'd established. Both

Sunstrike and Willowpaw were involved. Woodclaw was unofficially in, and Frostpaw and Pondpaw were nowhere to be mentioned.

"Those were the first things we came up with." Sunstrike said. He rasped at the fur on his chest.

Frostpaw rose to her paws. Her fur was slightly spiked and her mouth twitched downward into a frown. "Can we go back to camp now? I'm exhausted."

The other cats nodded and began to stretch out their stiff limbs. A deep cold had set into the night and Willowpaw wanted to do nothing more than curl up in her warm nest. Frostpaw took the lead back, tail dragging behind her. Pondpaw trotted to catch up while Willowpaw and the toms lingered.

Woodclaw finished extending his legs and sighed. "Now that you mention it, I'm tired too." He caught up to the sisters.

Willowpaw waited for Sunstrike, who was in the middle of a great yawn. He stood to his full height, several mouse lengths taller than Willowpaw, and the two followed the rest.

"I wouldn't be worried about what Woodclaw said." Sunstrike murmured to Willowpaw, lowering his head.

"I'm not worried!" She protested. But upon saying so, she felt a claw of doubt wedge its way into her thoughts.

The red tom sniffed.

She sighed. "I mean, I guess I am. Just a little bit. I don't want to die. And we didn't get very much done tonight." She hopped over a jutting tree root.

"Well I'm happy." Sunstrike meowed. He easily stepped over the same root.

"Oh? And why is that?" Willowpaw could see the entrance to camp approaching. Her thoughts wandered to her training session later that morning. *It won't be easy.*

"Because I was able to spend time with you."

The she-cat almost tripped over her own paws. She snapped her head to Sunstrike. His ice-blue eyes focused on his paws but she still saw them twinkling. Her head buzzed. *What do I say?!*

"Uh, thanks." She felt her ear tips burn with embarrassment.

The group of cats slid into camp, careful not to wake their Clanmates. Pondpaw nuzzled her sister before heading to the medicine den.

"Goodnight." Sunstrike whispered. He and Woodclaw padded to the warriors' den.

Willowpaw barely had a chance to respond. For after her mind cleared enough to speak, the brothers had already disappeared. She turned to Frostpaw, but she too had already vanished in her den.

# Chapter 22 > > Discussions

Less than a moon after the secret meeting, Willowpaw found herself sitting with Pondpaw and Frostpaw, discussing the Gathering.

"Every Clan looked half-starved." Pondpaw continued.

Frostpaw and Willowpaw pricked their ears. "So it's not just us." Frostpaw murmured.

Pondpaw shook her head.

"And the other Clans' trouble with traps is fading too. I think within the next moon, they should be gone."

Relieved sighs from Frostpaw and Willowpaw. "Thank StarClan." The gray apprentice muttered.

The three she-cats turned to watch as the dawn patrol returned, wearing content expressions. One of whom was Brightblossom.

The pretty warrior padded up to Willowpaw, mismatched eyes glowing.

"Hello, Brightblossom!" The apprentice blinked warmly.

Her mentor dipped her head in greeting to the three she-cats.

"We didn't see a single trap this morning!" Brightblossom announced.

The apprentices meowed happily.

"Oh and Willowpaw, Frostpaw, your assessment is coming up soon. Would you like to go training for a little bit?" Brightblossom angled her head, whiskers twitching.

Willowpaw nodded eagerly. She still wanted to work on her battle skills.

To her surprise, Frostpaw shook her head softly. "Thank you, but I'd like to spend some time with my sister." Pondpaw blinked in astonishment and purred.

Brightblossom dipped her head. "I understand." She waved her tail for her apprentice to follow as she turned and padded toward the camp exit.

Willowpaw trotted up beside her mentor. It dawned on her that they were nearly the same height. Only a mousetail separated the two she-cats. She guessed her stature had changed as well; no longer was she a chubby kit, soft with downy fur. Her legs had lengthened, face elongated. She was sure she had at least some muscle, rippling underneath her fur with each stride.

Beside her, her mentor sighed. "I'm proud of you, Willowpaw."

Willowpaw flicked her ears in amusement. "I'm not a warrior quite yet."

Brightblossom snorted. "No, but you're soon to be. Not to mention how much you have improved since we first trained together."

"Thank you." And she meant it.

Brightblossom continued to lead Willowpaw to their familiar training hollow. On the way, there was not a bird to be found amongst the trees' branches. The air was quiet and numbing. Willowpaw wondered how the forest could be so silent.

The two went over hunting, offensive skills and defensive, and the warrior code.

"...and each Clan must help each other so that no other Clan falls." Willowpaw finished. She waited for her mentor's reaction.

Brightblossom gave a single nod. "Brilliant job, Willowpaw. I see you making a fine warrior."

Willowpaw padded up to Brightblossom and nuzzled her warmly. Brightblossom purred. "Now, let's put those skills to the test and see if we can't bring back some prey."

And try as they might, the only fresh-kill they brought back was a small cardinal.

"Take it to Shimmerpelt and Raggedclaw." Brightblossom had ordered.

While setting it down in front of the elders, Willowpaw caught a snippet of their conversation.

"I don't remember a winter so dry." Raggedclaw observed, cloudy eyes staring at his paws.

"But I'm telling you, I feel rain coming!" Shimmerpelt protested. She lowered her head to take a bite from the bird.

Willowpaw dipped her head and slowly made for the exit.

"It's leafbare, mousebrain. Snow." Raggedclaw muttered.

Shimmerpelt hissed. "*End* of leafbare. I know rain when I feel it."

Willowpaw felt her blood run cold. *Rain. Storm. The prophecy.* It left her with a heavy ominous feeling.

The sight of Sunstrike and Woodclaw entering camp, tails drooping, did nothing to abate her gloom.

Since the night of the secret meeting, Willowpaw had made an effort to avoid the red tom. She always felt her ear tips burn when around him. *But I don't know why.*

Pawsteps grew louder and Willowpaw looked up to see the one cat she didn't want to talk to. "Hey Willowpaw." His eyes were warm.

"Hey." She looked down at her paws. *I still don't know what to say to him.*

"How's your training going?" He sat beside her and gazed out over the camp.

Willowpaw nodded. "Good."

The new warrior turned to meet Willowpaw's eyes. "Can we talk about the badger in the camp?"

She started, then realized he was referring to their awkward encounter. "Right. Sure." She gave her pelt a shake.

"I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable. I shouldn't have said that." He paused and took a deep breath. "But I really do enjoy being around you." He twitched his whiskers.

Willowpaw felt her pelt warm, and stuttered, "I- I mean you're a good friend too. I just don't like the awkwardness between us since the meeting." She was aware of the drop in Sunstrike's expression.

"Yeah. Me too. You know what? How about we just forget it ever happened. Everything's back to normal now." He straightened up, almost as if he were shaking away his feelings.

Willowpaw gave a sigh of relief. "Good. Now I'm going to see Frostpaw. I'll catch you later." She waved her tail and padded to the center of camp, searching for her best friend.

The ginger and white she-cat was lying in a patch of sunlight across from the apprentices' den. She flicked her tail lazily upon seeing Willowpaw.

She made her way over, glancing at the fresh-kill pile on her way. It sat empty, the only indicator it ever existed being the shallow dip in the ground. And to her embarrassment, her stomach gave a loud rumble at the sight. Her gaze darted to see if anyone had heard. Thankfully most of the cats were still out on patrol.

As she neared Frostpaw, she gave a friendly mew. Her friend returned it. Together they lay in the sun's weak light and talked. Willowpaw stretched each limb, feeling her muscles extend. They joked about Greeneyes and gossiped about the Clan's latest mates, Ashpelt and Fadedleaf.

Frostpaw nudged Willowpaw, pointing her ears to Birdeye. The she-cat had just emerged from the warriors' den and was walking toward Sunstrike. The apprentices called out a greeting and

received a small dip of Birdeye's head.

They watched as she chatted animatedly to Sunstrike.

"Who knew she had so much to say." Frostpaw snorted.

They continued to laze about until patrols returned and the moon began to rise. By then, the two she-cats had exhausted almost every topic of conversation.

Including Sunstrike.

"I knew he fancied you!" Frostpaw had exclaimed. She rolled onto her back.

"He never said that. And besides, he's just my friend. Truly, I don't feel anything but that. I've got more important things to worry about." Willowpaw had rolled her eyes. She flexed her claws, admiring the needle-sharp tip.

Frostpaw huffed. "Yeah, like the fact the two of you are in a prophecy together." She yawned. "If it helps, you'd be cute together."

Willowpaw swatted Frostpaw on the head. "Great StarClan, of course it doesn't help! Seriously, that is the *last* thing on my mind." The statement was mostly true.

# Chapter 23 >> A Big Day

With the end of leaf-bare came hope for a lush new-leaf. The air began to lose its bone-numbing chill and gave way to mild weather. New growth was just beginning to peek from the brown earth.

And Willowpaw found herself near the WindClan border. She was scenting for prey. Elusive prey. She followed a stale scent-trail further into the ThunderClan forest, cursing her luck.

*I'm sure Frostpaw is catching mice right now.* She thought bitterly.

The words of her mentor gently reminded her, *it's not a competition. It's an assessment of your individual skills.* Willowpaw understood this. She really did. But part of her wanted to be the very best.

*And I can't be the best if I come back to camp without food!* She looked around for Brightblossom, who was somewhere watching. Part of her was surprised at how well she could blend in, given her snow-white pelt.

A rustle in the leaf mold made Willowpaw snap back to her assessment. A mouse was rummaging, it's back on Willowpaw. Her eyes narrowed in concentration.

*A perfect opportunity.*

She let her instincts take over and glided closer on silent paws. A quick taste of the air told her the wind carried her scent away from the prey. She crept as close as she could before shifting her weight into her back paws. Tail steady.

And pounced.

She soared through the air and landed squarely on the mouse, neatly snapping its neck. She whispered her thanks to StarClan.

Willowpaw buried her kill under the roots of an oak, marking the spot with a mound of pebbles. She returned to hunting, but caught

nothing more that day.

Once the shadows lengthened considerably, she retraced her steps back to where she hid her mouse. *My only mouse.* As she padded back to camp, she blamed herself for not catching more. Cats needed the food. *And don't most apprentices bring back heaps of prey on their assessment?*

So by the time she returned to camp, her expression was sullen. She deposited her catch on the near-empty dip. Turning around, she spotted Brightblossom trotting up.

"Brilliant job!" She mewed. Despite her jutting ribs, she kept her pelt clean and groomed. With a pang, Willowpaw realized how much she would miss training with the cheerful she-cat.

"Thanks." Willowpaw said. "I wish I had brought back more, though." She nodded to her meager contribution.

Brightblossom shook her head. "Nonsense. Some patrols have been returning empty-pawed. For you to even catch one piece of prey is an achievement." She frowned. "I don't remember new-leafs being so barren. But no more of that. You've passed!" She bounced on her paws, eyes glittering.

Willowpaw felt excitement return. *I'm going to become a warrior today!* Joy fizzed throughout her pelt and made her whiskers shake. She nuzzled her mentor and excused herself to find Frostpaw.

The white and ginger apprentice found her first.

"Willowpaw, how did you assessment go? I caught a sparrow!" She seemed just as elated as Willowpaw. The two friends mewed excitedly.

"I'm not sure that's how warriors are supposed to act." Sunstrike sauntered up. Woodclaw was right behind and nodded in greeting to the apprentices. They exchanged words for several moments before Badgerstar's voice rang out through the camp.

Frostpaw and Willowpaw met each other's gaze, open mouthed.

Woodclaw snorted in amusement. "Don't trip up there." He nudged Frostpaw. They, along with the rest of the Clan, gathered underneath the leader.

Fernbelly and Hollyheart rushed over to their daughters, fussing over their pelts and murmuring loving words.

Willowpaw had never seen her mother so happy.

"Frostpaw. Willowpaw. It is time for your warrior ceremony." Badgerstar beckoned the two apprentices forward. They wriggled out of their mothers' reach and approached the leader.

"It is with great honor I call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices. They have learned the ways of your noble code and I commend them as warriors in their turn." His amber eyes fixed on Willowpaw and Frostpaw.

Her heart pounded in her chest, ready to break free. She knew that all her training, all the days of practicing and practicing had been leading to this moment. She yearned to hear her leader's next words.

"Willowpaw, Frostpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Willowpaw dipped her head, feeling the spirits of all the warriors before her murmur at once. "I do."

Beside her, Frostpaw's loud voice came out as a squeak "I do."

"Then by the powers of StarClan I grant you your warrior name. Willowpaw, you shall now be known as Willowcloud. StarClan honors your faith and curiosity. We welcome you as a full member of ThunderClan." Badgerstar rested his head upon hers and she gave his shoulder a respectful lick.

He turned his attention on Frostpaw. "Frostpaw, you shall now be known as Frostflower. StarClan values your determination and cleverness. I welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

Cheers erupted, yowling the new warriors' names to the heavens.

They filled Willowcloud with joy, but most of all, of duty. Of determination to make sure her Clan would survive this storm on the horizon.

Willowcloud turned her face up to the stars appearing in the darkening sky. *Firestar, I will not let you down.*

Her silent vigil was a chilly one. Despite days being mild, the nights still carried a bite in the air.

Frostflower sat on the opposite end of the camp, her pelt fluffed out against the weather. Willowcloud returned her attention to her watch. She let her eyes scan the corners of the camp and the edge of the forest before taking the time to reflect.

Her pelt crawled with apprehension at the thought of the approaching storm. She considered telling the Clan, or at least Badgerstar. *But what good would that do?* There wasn't much they could do to prepare.

*There's no way we can stay in the gorge.* The thought made her stiffen in realization. *As soon as the rains come, it'll flood.* Willowcloud dug her claws into the earth.

Steely determination hardened her gaze. *I'll find a temporary camp. ThunderClan will survive.*

She kept her vigil until the sky lightened with the first hints of dawn. Warriors shuffled in their nests and emerged bleary-eyed. Brightblossom was one of the first. She padded to her former apprentice and dipped her head.

Willowcloud breathed a sigh. "So I'm a warrior now." She murmured. The words sent a thrill through her body.

Brightblossom nodded. "You earned it. Now, would you like to see if we can't go on a border patrol?" She glanced over at Driftbreeze, who was yawning.

The new warrior agreed enthusiastically.

# Chapter 24 >> Apprehension

Willowcloud was still glowing from her first patrol as a warrior. No longer was she sent to the rear of the group; now she strode with the others in the front.

She knew only her name had changed; the color of her pelt remained the same, and her eyes had not shifted hues. It was purely a new title, and yet it meant so much to her. *A warrior.* Willowcloud had straightened her chin and let her legs take long, graceful strides.

Even back at camp, where she had shared a sparrow with Frostflower, Sunstrike, and Woodclaw, she felt different. Like she had more authority.

This bout of confidence led her to ask the three, "We should find a safe place for the Clan."

Woodclaw stopped mid-sentence, frowning. He narrowed his eyes in confusion. Frostflower and Sunstrike turned their heads to meet Willowcloud's.

"Sorry," she muttered, feeling guilty for interrupting Woodclaw. "What I'm saying is that while on vigil, I realized our camp is going to flood, no doubt. I mean, look at this place."

Her friends darted their eyes around the sheer cliff-like sides of the camp. They slowly nodded in agreement. Sunstrike's startling blue gaze found Willowcloud's. "Any ideas?"

The gray warrior fumbled for words.

Frostflower narrowed her eyes. "Well, if ThunderClan can't stay here, we should see if there are any places around our territory that can serve as a replacement camp."

"Wait, right now?" Woodclaw looked between the she-cats wildly.

Rolling her eyes, Frostflower nodded.

Over the next quarter moon, the four cats searched daily for somewhere their Clan could stay. Frostflower mentioned their plan to her sister, who promised to keep attempting to contact StarClan.

"They're proving to be elusive." The black she-cat whimpered. She could barely meet her sister's gaze.

Exactly half a moon after Willowcloud received her name, she found herself with Sunstrike, searching the far reaches of ThunderClan territory for a safe camp. Rosy light spilled from between the leaves as the day wound to an end. Shadows drew longer. Paws grew weary, and heads heavy.

Willowcloud leaped to the top of a fallen tree and surveyed the area. Her eyes glowed a dull green, and she lowered them in disappointment after her inspection. Releasing a sigh, she let her shoulders drop.

Beside her, the red tom sat quietly. His posture remained rigid and he did not meet Willowcloud's eyes.

"I can't let myself get down." The gray tabby said. Her words were almost too soft to hear. "I made a promise to myself; not to fail the Clans." She stared into the darkening forest, imagining the other Clans, unaware of any danger. Living day by day. Their fate rested upon the young warrior's sagging shoulders.

She straightened.

"I have faith in you, Willowcloud. And whenever you need assistance, I am always here." Sunstrike raised his eyes to Willowcloud's, a frozen lake churning with waves of emotion below.

The she-cat was taken aback by his intensity. For the first time, she felt something stirring in her stomach, akin to butterflies fluttering senselessly about. She gave a small dip of her head, trying to get rid of the bothersome sensation.

"I still think the old twolegplace will work. The ground there is

high, and the top will provide some protection against the rain." Willowcloud persisted. She had brought up the idea early during the search, but was shot down by both Sunstrike and Frostflower.

The tom shrugged. "There doesn't seem to be any other option."

"Shall we tell Badgerstar, then? And since the Gathering is tomorrow night, he can alert the other Clans so we'll all be prepared." Willowcloud stretched her legs, tired from the day's work.

Stunstrike nodded after a moment's pause.

The two warriors jumped from the log and began to head back to camp. They took a detour, stopping to collect water from the shrunken lake.

The cracked earth beneath their paws was a steady reminder of how desperately the forest needed water. However, Willowcloud knew to be careful of what you wished for.

-

Badgerstar was not as surprised as Willowcloud expected. He nodded slowly, the silver hairs along his muzzle catching the bright moonlight. "Moons ago, I was told a young tree held fate between its leaves. My speculations about its meaning have been confirmed. Tomorrow's Gathering is when I will announce the threat to the other Clans." A pause. "I don't suppose you know when this danger is to arrive, do you?"

Willowcloud shook her head solemnly.

Badgerstar nodded. "So is the will of StarClan." He lifted his head to the night sky, where the stars were washed out by the moon's brilliance. Returning his gaze upon the young warrior, he said, "You have done enough for one day. Rest, and rejuvenate. StarClan knows you've earned it." Badgerstar dipped his head.

Willowcloud returned the gesture and left her leader atop the Highledge, his face turned to meet the moon's.

-

Screeches ripped through the branches of the trees. Leaves crumbled into dust and were swept along with the gales. Fat drops of rain pounded against their bare branches, rivaling the roar of the thunder.

Jagged lightning split the sky. In its brief illumination, figures of cats could be seen. They moved as one, pelts sweeping against their neighbors, cries issued in a chorus of despair. The cats fled from a black wave of water. Its inky droplets tugged at the toes of the flagging.

Willowcloud was among those in the group. She could not make out any of the faces nor scents.

Frantically, she cried for her parents, her friends, anyone that could hear her.

But the swarm of cats gave no response. They shoved her forward and she knew she would be trampled if she fell behind.

Raw fear shot through her veins with the intensity of the bolts overhead. Every part of her body screamed for her to move faster, to hurry. And one look back told her no different.

The path ahead was dark. Her paws stumbled on those of others. Another flash of lightning made Willowcloud's blood freeze in her body.

A second dark wave was racing straight towards the mass. Accompanied with cries, the cats split. Willowcloud was left racing with a single faceless cat beside her. She knew not about the fate of the others, but that if she stopped now she was surely doomed.

"Run!" She yowled breathlessly to the shadow beside her.

The roar of the wave grew ever louder. Willowcloud resisted the urge to look back until the figure gave a caterwaul and fell.

The she-cat flipped her head back and for a moment lost the ability to breathe. Frostflower lay motionless behind her, dark water

frothing around her form. Her blue eyes locked with Willowcloud's. Pleading.

Willowcloud screeched in horror and tried to run back to save her friend but the harder she ran, the dimmer her vision grew until it finally faded into a numbing blackness. Devoid of sound. Empty of thought.

Screeching, Willowcloud awoke. Her limbs flailed wildly as she tried to find the ground.

"Willowcloud! What's wrong?!" Frostflower placed her paws on her friend's shoulders.

The gray tabby, heart still racing, met Frostflower's eyes. *She's not dead!*

Other warriors raised their heads from their nests, bleary eyed and disgruntled. They glanced around for the source of the disturbance.

Willowcloud began to realize what just happened was a bad dream and nothing more. Her pelt burned with embarrassment. She lowered her head, apologizing while flicking her gaze from warrior to warrior. Finally, it landed upon Sunstrike, who stared back with worry swimming in his eyes. She had to look away.

Frostflower continued rasping her tongue over her friend's fur. "Everything alright?" She whispered.

Silence.

"It's okay. We can talk about it later."

Willowcloud nodded, aware that her friend couldn't see her response, as her back was now turned.

Taking a deep breath, she rested her head upon her paws. The warmth of Frostflower's pelt against hers was comforting, yet the image of her bright blue eyes crying for help was imprinted in the young warrior's head.

*It's just a dream. A bad, bad dream.* Willowcloud kept repeating the

words until her thoughts blurred and she fell back into an uneasy sleep.

-

Heavy gray clouds greeted the ThunderClan warriors as they rose from their nests. The churning mass cast an ominous air upon the camp.

Willowcloud watched it nervously, paws twitching. Yawning, Frostflower walked up. "Is that what we're afraid of?" Her eyes grew.

Willowcloud lowered her gaze. "What else would it be?" Her voice was hushed. Scared.

More paw steps.

Pondpaw approached, and judging from her heavy gait, she held no enthusiasm.

"I see you have noticed the sky as well." She said.

The three she-cats fixed their gaze upward, eyes reflecting the coming maelstrom. Their fur prickled with apprehension.

Without notice, a bolt of lightning streaked across the sky and touched the top of a tree, just above the camp. It exploded in a burst of sparks and bark.

Willowcloud felt a wave of dread. There was no time left to warn the other Clans.

The storm was upon them.

# Chapter 25 > > Evacuation

Before long, every cat in ThunderClan was gathered in the center of camp, staring at the sky. Uneasy murmurs rippled through the crowd, with an occasional hopeful remark.

What caught their attention more so than the end of the drought was the form of these clouds. They were not the common filaments of downy white or gray – these clouds were shaped like bubbles, an unearthly sight.

Even the elders, who lived more moons than Willowcloud and Frostflower put together, commented on the peculiar sky.

Meanwhile, Badgerstar remained atop Highrock, unmoving. His long pelt bristled ever so slightly. "Cats of ThunderClan," he raised his voice to be heard over the wind, gaining speed with each heartbeat. "This is no ordinary storm, thus I am ordering an evacuation of camp. Please collect whatever you can carry and gather below the Highrock."

His words were greeted with cries of protest and indignation. A small sort of chaos broke out among the Clan; warriors scrambled past each other and into their den, while Pondpaw and Fawndapple stacked their meager supply of herbs together for the move.

The black medicine cat apprentice caught her sister's eye and they exchanged a hollow look. They knew there was no more time to plan, to prepare.

Willowcloud's mother swept her away, and her father quickly joined the two. The mates were attempting to convince their daughter not to fret, that StarClan will not fail ThunderClan in their time of need.

However, the young warrior wasn't listening. Her head was spinning with the suddenness of everything.

*There was supposed to be more time! How in StarClan am I going to save the Clan now?*

Badgerstar rushed his clanmates, quickly grouping them. Both him and the deputy, Driftbreeze, took the lead as they bundled their Clan out of their home and into the forest, which was growing more hostile by the moment. Wind began to pick up, ruffling the cats' pelts the wrong way.

Willowcloud's stomach did a flip as Sunstrike padded up, jaws full of moss. His brother followed right behind. They acknowledged each other with a nod. Both them, Frostflower, and Pondpaw trotted beside each other in silence.

The Clan swiftly wove between the newly sprouting undergrowth, making their way to the abandoned twolegplace. Soon, its tall shape could be seen looming through the trees. Badgerstar ushered his clan inside, waiting until the last cats entered before joining them.

ThunderClan, the Clan of fierce warriors and proud cats, was reduced to the wide-eyed group huddled below the ramshackle roof. Most did not know of the magnitude of the storm. They only knew Badgerstar called for a camp evacuation – so it must be grave indeed.

The weary tom took his place at the head of the group. He was followed by every cat's eyes.

"I apologize for not explaining the current situation." He began. "What is upon us is a storm unlike that of which the Clan has seen before." His darkened amber gaze swept his Clanmates. This aroused sharp intakes of breath. Frightened expressions.

"However, worry not. We are ThunderClan. We *will* survive." He lashed his tail.

His words did little to relieve the cats.

"Now, let's get used to our new camp. I want the medicine cats and Fadedleaf to have the driest place ..." Badgerstar started the task of assigning spots for the warriors and others to make their nests.

Fadedleaf, belly swollen with kits, was led by Ashpelt to her new resting place. All the while she kindly denied his help.

Willowcloud and her friends made their nests close to each other, against a shabby corner of the twoleg structure.

Worry gnawed at her stomach, a ravenous creature unwilling to stop.

"What's got your tail in a twist?" Frostflower said, nudging her friend. "Well, besides the approaching disaster-storm."

"The other Clans! We were supposed to warn them tonight at the Gathering, but I don't know if we will be able to make it!" Willowcloud nodded at the angry sky. "I should have told them sooner. Now they won't have any clue what's going on. If they die because of me - "

Frostflower silenced her with her tail. "Listen, I'm sure they'll manage. Just worry about us for now." She nuzzled Willowcloud.

The gray tabby appreciated her friend's effort. She knew it was the best Frostflower could do. But, like Badgerstar's empty words, it did nothing to quell her gut-wrenching feeling. She remembered the warrior code, its words still fresh from her assessment.

*Each Clan must help the others so that no Clan will fall.*

*It's my duty.*

Willowcloud left her friends, talking quietly amongst themselves, and found her leader. He was watching over the Clan, not bothering to set up his own nest. Driftbreeze sat at his side, watching over the cats with the same intense concentration.

"Greetings, Willowcloud." Badgerstar dipped his head upon seeing her.

She returned the gesture.

She wasted no time telling him of her thoughts. He listened with the patience of many seasons, nodding slowly.

"I understand why you would want to alert the other Clans, but you must remember that your first duty is to us. ThunderClan. It is not safe to wander the woods in this weather, and because of that I am ordering you to stay here." His words were final, even sharp at the edges.

Dismay joined worry in Willowcloud's stomach, but she did not dare argue. As is also stated in the warrior code, *Clan leader's word is law.*

Wanting solitude, she retreated to a relatively secluded portion of the twoleg nest. One in which loose wood swayed with wind and caused it to whistle. She let her eyes sweep the forest. Images from her dream moons ago came rushing back; pictures of a desolate landscape. Bleak and gray. It was helplessness that bothered her the most.

*There's nothing I can do but wait and watch.*

And to Willowcloud, chosen of StarClan's message, it felt wrong.

*Aren't prophecy cats meant to do something?*

Firestar, her greatest inspiration, changed the Clans forever.

*And what have I done?*

The woeful answer resounded loudly: *Nothing.*

Such an empty word, nothing.

Looking back, Willowcloud would come to regret her decision for seasons. And yet, she let her naïve reasoning win over. For what was the countless time, she was going to defy her leader's word.

-

Rain was just beginning to fall as Willowcloud roused her friends from their sleep. She urged them to stay silent. Once they had all awoken enough to blink drowsiness from their eyes, Willowcloud whispered her plan, much to their distaste.

"C'mon, really? Enough with the heroism. Just go to sleep and let them work it out." Woodclaw sighed. He returned to his nest.

That left Frostflower and Sunstrike. Both cats looked unwilling to venture out, but were conflicted whether or not to object.

Sunstrike spoke up first. "What do you plan on saying? It's not like you can waltz in and expect to tell leaders how to run their Clan." He made a valid point.

Willowcloud was adamant. She locked eyes with him. "It's my duty."

Frostflower rolled her eyes. "Listen, you know I'm going to go with you if you're serious." She sighed. "Which I'm sure you are. But just remember... we're warriors now. We can't sneak around and get away with the stuff we used to. If we're caught, we could get into serious trouble." Her blue eyes flashed.

Sunstrike nodded, focused on his paws.

Indignation flared in Willowcloud. "Well, I am going right now to tell ShadowClan. Whoever wants to come with, now's your chance." She slipped away from the sleeping huddle of warriors and made for the twoleg nest exit.

Much to her relief, two sets of quiet pawsteps followed hers. *It would be scary to go out alone,* She admitted to herself.

The forest was treacherous. Bubbly clouds obscured the full moon, and strong, indecisive winds gusted from every direction. More than once, the cats had to stop walking in fear of being blown over. Above, trees creaked violently. Their moans were like those of a creature in great pain.

"So *do* you have a plan for your speech?" Sunstrike asked. His voice threatened to be carried away by the wind.

Willowcloud nodded, only to keep questions away. In truth, she had no idea.

Beside her, Frostflower lowered her head as the rain intensified. Its cold, fat drops wormed beneath their pelts and chilled to the bone.

The wind howled wildly, sending the trees into a state of wobbliness.

The cats paused next to an oak trunk, digging their claws into the ground for stability.

Then, as if from the depths of the earth itself, a low *creeaaking* sounded. It grew louder than the wind until it was all that filled their ears. They searched wildly for the noise until they spotted the outline of a tall tree, swiftly approaching them.

*It's falling!*

There was hardly time to act. Willowcloud's paws skidded on the slick grass as she scrambled out of its path. She opened her mouth to call out a warning, but only a yowl escaped her jaws.

A massive *thump* shook the ground. It reverberated through Willowcloud's body, stealing the air from her lungs. She felt an intense weight hit her back, and was slammed to the ground.

Darkness enveloped her.

--

It was a bloodcurdling screech that jolted Willowcloud from her brief state of unconsciousness. She flailed under the weight of a branch pinning her. Fortunately, with a bit of wriggling, she was able to free herself.

She looked around for Frostflower and Sunstrike. The red tom was standing several taillengths across from Willowcloud. His expression was stretched in horror and shock.

Lightning cracked overhead, revealing a limp white shape only mouselengths behind where Willowcloud fell.

The next few moments felt agonizingly slow, and every detail would be ingrained in the young warrior's memory for countless moons.

*No.*

Unmoving. Still.

*No.*

Willowcloud felt her own voice rise calling out her friend's name.

Again.

No response.

Turning more desperate, Willowcloud was at Frostflower's side in an instant. She used every bit of her strength in an attempt to lift the heavy branch off her friend's body. Sunstrike joined, just managing to release her from the limb's grasp.

Willowcloud pulled Frostflower out and rasped her fur roughly. She muttered senseless words. Her mind simply could not understand what was happening.

And yet Frostflower remained still.

Shattered, was Willowcloud's heart. Pieces of it lie haphazardly in the wreckage. Some were swept by the wind, up into the clouds, never to return. Carried with Frostflower's spirit.

However, in the moment, Willowcloud felt nothing. She was utterly numb. Her whole world was trained upon Frostflower's eyes, stretched open from her final moments. The absolute terror reflected there made her shake violently.

*No, no, no.*

Once it became clear her friend would never breathe again, the memories came. From kits, apprentices, and every adventure in between. The sisterly bond they shared.

Inseparable.

Willowcloud remained there, in a state of wretched shock. She thought, if she willed hard enough, life would return to her eyes and everything revert to normal. No tree, no storm.

Wishful thinking did nothing to change Frostflower's fate.

-

*Thoughts? Maybe you predicted it? Either way, life is never going to be the same for our protagonist.*

*Personally, it was hard letting go of Frostflower. I feel for Willowcloud. . .even though you could say she was partially to blame.*

# Chapter 26 > > Tragedy

Time crawled by like an eternity and yet it felt so quick. When Willowcloud dared to look up, she found her fur soaked to the skin and her body shivering uncontrollably. Sunstrike sat next to her, head lowered in grief.

Eventually, the red tom gently nudged Willowcloud. "We should get back." His voice was haggard.

Willowcloud couldn't move. She was frozen beside Frostflower's shape. She felt if she did change position, her world would spiral away into oblivion.

Again, a soft nudge. He helped her onto her wobbly paws. Twice she stumbled, before regaining enough strength to steady herself.

Sunstrike took Frostflower's scruff and heaved her onto his back. The two sullen cats trudged through the woods, making slow progress due to the storm.

All the while, Willowcloud kept her eyes fixed directly in front of her. She didn't speak a word.

The heavy clouds made it impossible to determine night or day so upon return to camp, some cats paced anxiously while others slept. Those awake turned their faces towards the young warriors.

The moments following became a blur.

Frantic shouts, concerned faces, movement. Willowcloud could hardly keep track of all the cats rushing around. She managed to stumble into her makeshift warrior nest. Her eyes stared straight ahead, unseeing of the upheaval rising in the center of the abandoned twoleg den. Beside her, Frostflower's scent was fresh upon her nest.

A yowl of unimaginable grief rose into the air, carried by Fernbelly,

Frostflower's mother.

Willowcloud shut her eyes tight. Maybe, if she closed them hard enough, she could make everything disappear.

Meanwhile, Pondpaw stood in shock, staring at her sister. Her expression was frozen. Badgerstar was at the front of the crowd, his face lowered in sorrow. Other warriors looked on with horror. They cried to the heavy clouds, pleading for help. They questioned why StarClan could allow such misfortune to befall them.

Silently, Willowcloud asked the same. She cast her mind to Firestar. *Why did that happen? I thought she was part of the prophecy.*

The realization was more displeasing than the question.

*Because I wanted her to come.* She opened her eyes with a flash, dismay causing her fur to stand on end. *Had I listened to Badgerstar's orders, she would be alive. I killed Frostflower.*

Willowcloud opened her jaws wide and let out a mournful yowl. She buried her head into her paws, eyes burning. More questions filled her mind. *How will life go on without her? Is she truly gone?*

Sorrow threatened to overtake her if she remained in the nest any longer, so she rose. Instinctively, she looked for Frostflower. Her heart shattered a bit more as she remembered. Her legs felt weak again.

She ventured to the twoleg nest's exit, where, not too long ago, Frostflower had left, following her naïve friend on a doomed trek. She looked out once again into the woods, like she had done no less than a sunrise ago. Wind continued to sway the trees. Lightning traced its way across the sky, accompanied with earth-shaking rounds of thunder. The forest took no notice of the life it had stolen.

The gray tabby sat there, her eyes reflecting the bleak sky.

Beyond the clouds, glittering stars wept. And yet, their silver tears were not enough to pierce the storm.

-

ThunderClan kept their heads lowered in sadness. Their paws dragged. Such a fiery light had been snuffed out before it had the chance to shine.

Willowcloud lay tossing in turning in her nest, commanded to rest by Badgerstar. He had promised her a vigil for Frostflower once she rested. Willowcloud had objected and lied there with her head buried in her paws, until her exhaustion caught up with her and she fell into a fretful sleep.

She was dreaming.

It was the abandoned twolegplace, temporarily populated with ThunderClan. Willowcloud knew she was not awake because Frostflower's living form rested peacefully beside her. She was half tempted to reach out and nuzzle her friend, but knew if she did, her dream would be shattered.

Instead, she rose from her nest and made her way to her usual spot by the twoleg exit. She realized the wind howled more fiercely than ever, and the twoleg structure itself swayed unsteadily. Overhead, the sky rumbled.

A forlorn expression dragged at her face.

Then, a shimmering orange shape emerged from behind the trees.

*Firestar!*

She couldn't say she was excited to see him again. Not after what had happened.

"Beware, Willowcloud, this storm is not yet over." He said. His dazzling green eyes were dulled with sadness.

"Enough already!" She shouted, slightly surprised by her own boldness. "I've had enough of being the prophecy cat. You never told me Frostflower was going to die!" She could feel her eyes beginning to burn.

Firestar lowered his head. "I understand. But please, hear me out. Willowcloud, you must wake up right now or else your Clan's

wellbeing is at stake." His voice carried urgency.

Willowcloud, being in the state she was, barely heard the orange tom's words. "You lied to me!" Now trembling with sadness and rage, "You said I was chosen! Don't chosen cats protect their friends? Isn't *StarClan* supposed to protect them?"

Firestar met her eyes, his green gaze steely. "Awaken. Now. There is no time."

Willowcloud glared at him. "*No*! You don't understand what it's like! You..." Her voice trailed off. She sniffled.

"Willowcloud, *WAKE UP!*"

She snapped her eyes open just as a moaning filled the air. It seemed to come from all around her. Sickness filled her stomach as she recognized it. Her eyes darted around to find its source... only to discover the sound was emanating from the very walls of the twoleg structure.

"Everybody, wake up! The twoleg nest is falling!" She was taken aback by the roughness of her voice due to disuse.

Cats jumped from their resting places, looking around wildly. Badgerstar was quickly awake, and called for his Clan to evacuate.

The groaning grew louder, just like the falling tree had the previous morning. Panic filled Willowcloud. She raced to Frostflower's body and grabbed her scruff. Before she could drag her friend away, Sunstrike ran up to her.

"Go!" He cried, shoving her away. Willowcloud screeched in protest and thrashed.

Sunstrike relented. He half dragged, half pushed Willowcloud out of the house.

Cats rushed out of every crevice, hysterically escaping the structure like rats from carrion. They regathered a couple tree-lengths from the shelter, shivering and huddling together.

Sunstrike had to hold Willowcloud back as the devastated she-cat tried to get back into the twoleg nest. She howled for Frostflower, each time more heartbreaking than the last.

Inevitably, the den began to fold in on itself. It was slow at first, the walls tilting inward before the rest of the den followed suit. Brightblossom and Beeflight were by the collapsing structure, helping their remaining clanmates escape. The rest of the Clan could hear their urgent shouts.

With a final air-rattling roar, the den imploded. Several warriors, including Fernbelly, were thrown by the wreckage or pinned under beams. More clanmates hurried to help free them, sliding on the slick grass along the way.

Meanwhile, Hollyheart and Oakfur crowded around their daughter. Pity glowed in their eyes, paired with the inability to relate to Willowcloud's tumultuous emotions. Hollyheart rasped her tongue over Willowcloud's ear, and she let her. Any sense of pride was gone. She felt like the tiny speck she was, lost amidst this raging tempest. Once again, she felt a wretched twisting in her stomach; at this point, all too familiar.

Oakfur murmured comforting words to his daughter. Willowcloud knew her parents were only trying to help, but it felt as if they were making the situation worse. She lowered her head, again focusing her gaze on the drenched ground.

She couldn't let her eyes meet the rubble.

-

*Alright, so a bit of an author's note. I'm participating in National Novel Writing Month 2016, so for the entirety of November, this book will be on hold. My attention will be devoted to writing a novel of 50,000 words in 30 days. I've actually been planning this for a couple years, haha.*

*So I apologize for the inconvenience, but updates for this story will resume in December.*

*Until then, may StarClan guide your paws and light your path.*

# Chapter 27 >> Without a Home

Shaken, hungry, and cold. ThunderClan trudged through what once was their lively territory through transformed marshy ground and deep puddles. They had already visited their gorge, and to nobody's surprise, found it filled with murky water.

Now, under the suggestion of Driftbreeze and Badgerstar, the Clan found themselves heading toward WindClan territory.

"Their land is higher up, safe from the floods. And I would hope they allow us to stay until the storm passes." The old leader was looking worse for the wear. His pelt was shaggy and ungroomed, his sharp amber eyes now dulled. The others reflected his state. Everyone was drained from the recent events.

Willowcloud trailed behind in silence. She was detached from reality and in result, tripped on debris littering the ground. Her thoughts spun in circles, revisiting the accident and the image of Frostflower's body, now abandoned in the collapsed form of the twoleg nest. It made her sick.

Frostflower, her spunky and adventurous best friend, was now dead. Ripped out of her life forever, and crushed underneath the walls of an old twoleg den.

*That I suggested we stay at.*

Again, a rush of guilt.

Sunstrike padded at her side, though his eyes didn't dare glance over at Willowcloud. Like the rest of the Clan, words evaded them and instead they felt stunned into silence.

They stuck close together as they walked, while the winds howled

fiercely through the trees and whipped branches from them like frail moss. As they neared the edge of ThunderClan territory, the Clan heard an unmistakable groaning. Fortunately, they were far from it as the ground suddenly shook beneath their paws and a crashing echoed through the woods.

Willowcloud froze, rain dripping from her whiskers and fur. Her eyes grew to the size of saucers and she began to shiver. At her side approached Sunstrike.

"It's okay." He said. He pressed against her shoulder and gently nudged her forward. Willowcloud took shaky steps with his help.

Just up ahead through the undergrowth, there was a dull roaring. Badgerstar signaled a halt at the head of the cluster and pushed through the tall grasses. Everyone waited with worried expressions. After several heartbeats, murmurs began to ripple through the cats.

A rustle, and then Badgerstar shouldered his way back. His gaze was hollow. "The stream..." He trailed off and shook his head gently. The cats watched him and cast glances to one another. Willowcloud could pick out the frantic voices of her denmates. They weren't used to seeing Badgerstar so helpless.

Driftbreeze raised her head to meet her mate's eyes. They shared a glance and the deputy cleared her throat pointedly. "What seems to be the matter?"

Badgerstar straightened his posture, lifting his silver muzzle to address the rest of the Clan. "The stream is flooded and the waters look quite violent."

Willowcloud could hear the defeated sighs of her Clanmates around her. On the other side of Sunstrike, a she-cat meowed. "We can't be stranded." Willowcloud recognized her as Birdeye. She lifted her gaze to meet the bluish cat's and was surprised to find no contempt there. Though she did notice her inch closer to Sunstrike.

Badgerstar shared a quiet word with Driftbreeze while the rest of the Clan muttered anxiously. Finally, Badgerstar spoke.

"We must get to WindClan, and no water will stop us." He waved his tail for his Clanmates to follow.

Willowcloud couldn't help but feel surprised as she swept her gaze along the once peaceful stream. Its waters tumbled over each other like frantic cats and splashed harshly against the pebbles. What was once an easy leap across would now result in a swim. She could only imagine what Frostflower would say to such a sight. She choked back a sob.

Badgerstar inspected the stream once again, this time with a new determination in his eyes. Experimentally he dipped a paw in the water and, finding it unsatisfactory, withdrew it.

"The only way across is to jump." He said, his voice carrying a twinge of irritation. This arose protests from the cats.

Their leader snapped a sharp amber gaze at them. "Do you see any other option? Your pelts are already soggy." The cats squirmed under his eyes and lowered their gazes in turn.

He scanned the Clan, searching until he found Beeflight. "I need you to cross the stream and help your clanmates do the same." The lean tom gave a nod.

The entire Clan watched as the cat shimmied right up to the side of the stream and waggled his haunches. Beeflight used his long legs to push from the bank and sailed across the water like his namesake.

His paws slipped and his head fell under. The cats rushed to the edge of the stream and peered out over the rapids. The white-capped waters surged, with no sign of the golden tom.

Then a striped head appeared from further downstream, gasping for air.

"Swim!" Brightblossom cried. She scrambled as far to the edge of the stream as she could go. Her odd eyes were wild.

Beeflight managed to stretch his paws to shore and heave himself to land. His pelt dripped with water and debris, but he raised his head

with an attempt of mirth in his eyes. "Don't slip!" He called, the storm threatening to carry his voice away. The rest of the cats breathed something of a relieved sigh.

Badgerstar looked uneasy as he gave the signal for them to cross.

Paws and pelts flew as the cats launched themselves through the air in an effort to avoid as much of the rough water as they could. Most ended up just past midway, and Beeflight waded out to help them.

Hollyheart and Oakfur stuck by their daughter and were right behind her as she leaped. Though she felt as if her paws carried no strength, she ended up halfway across and was dragged the rest of the way by one of her clanmates.

Willowcloud was numb as she sat on the other side of the stream while the rest of her clanmates crossed. Her only thoughts were that of Frostflower's body, somewhere under the wreckage. It was so far away. The stream that separated the territories felt as if it spanned for treelengths rather than foxlengths. Once again, she had to shut tight her eyes.

Shimmerpelt was one of the last to cross, and being the oldest cat in the Clan, received the help of every other warrior. She denied the assistance, but it was clear she was thankful. Once the last had leaped, Badgerstar took lead and headed for the rises of WindClan's moor.

It was Oakfur this time who gently guided Willowcloud along with the rest of ThunderClan. She let her paw steps fall in sync with his and pressed against his shoulder. Saying nothing, he gave his daughter a nuzzle.

The WindClan moorland proved to be more treacherous than the forest. Without trees to break the wind, it gusted at full force against the pelts of the cats. More than once they had to stop and dig their claws into the ground. Underpaw, the grass squished and seeped with water. At this point, ThunderClan didn't care about getting wetter. All that mattered to them was finding somewhere relatively safe.

As they climbed the ridge of the first hill, Raggedclaw stumbled and fell. The cats around him rushed to his assistance. He accepted it without the usual complaints. Instead, his eyes, now glazed with exhaustion, barely left their stare.

"We're almost there, Willowcloud." Her father murmured, low enough for only her to hear. She acknowledged it with a small nod. Her paws felt heavier than stone and her very bones shivered.

But she pressed on. For there was no option to look back.

Badgerstar led ThunderClan up the highest hill where WindClan's sheltered camp lie. He called out a weary greeting. For several moments, the only reply was the crackle of lightning. Then, a head poked from the top of the ridge. Its eyes widened in surprise as they surveyed the cats. Another head joined it, this one emerging to reveal Runningstar.

The skinny brown tom, who was usually so skittish at Gatherings, approached them with a calm demeanor.

"Runningstar," Badgerstar began, dipping his head. "Our territory has been destroyed and flooded. I hope to find enough kindness to stay here." He spoke evenly, but the rest of ThunderClan knew this was their only hope.

WindClan's leader narrowed his eyes at the pitiful Clan. He looked at them with distaste.

Should Runningstar deny them, Willowcloud realized they would be without shelter.

She along with the rest of the cats pleaded silently with the leader.

*I can only imagine how pathetic we must seem.*

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*Updates have returned! I am proud to announce my win at NaNoWriMo2016 and thus the completion of my upcoming novel. Like I've mentioned before, it will be posted next year.*
~~~

*Any thoughts about ThunderClan right now? I don't envy them. XD*

# Chapter 28 > > WindClan

"We don't need more mouths to feed," Runningstar said simply. He eyed the cats assembled behind Badgerstar, who stared back at him with shock.

Badgerstar himself fumbled for words. He quickly glanced to his mate beside him. "Please, Runningstar. I understand prey is scarce but we have nowhere to go." A hint of urgency crept into his voice.

The brown tom narrowed his eyes. "My decision is final." He spun on his paws and trudged back up the hill while the wind threatened to blow him away.

Willowcloud hoped it did.

Around her, her clanmates began to murmur to each other.

"Now what are we supposed to do?" Fadedleaf hissed to Ashpelt. Her green eyes were stretched in horror. They were at a loss of ideas. Some turned their gaze across the lake, which swelled with water and had grown greatly, to where RiverClan's camp was. Surely it too had been flooded. Their territory was wrought with small streams and soft ground.

Just as Badgerstar began to lead his Clan back down the hill, a voice called out. They looked behind and spotted a long-furred white tom bundling toward them.

"Cloudwatcher?" Fawndapple said softly. She made her way to the front of the crowd to greet him.

The medicine cat was out of breath by the time he approached, and took several heartbeats to reclaim his breath. ThunderClan waited nervously to hear his words.

"Please, excuse Runningstar. He only wants to protect WindClan." He dipped his head to both Badgerstar and Fawndapple. "We are

never ones to turn away a Clan in need, especially in a time so dire. Need I mention it's in the warrior code?"

Willowcloud felt a flash of remembrance as she recalled orating the same code to Brightblossom before her assessment.

"Do come in, these conditions are horrendous." Cloudwatcher waved his tail for ThunderClan to follow as he led them into WindClan camp.

Willowcloud was struck by how ingeniously WindClan had designed their camp. Instead of the water pooling in the center of the camp, which was a dip in the hill, they had dug rivets in the ground to channel the water into a small tunnel in the side of the rise. She imagined her clanmates were admiring it as well.

Cloudwatcher ducked into a different tunnel, the dirt beneath their paws packed firmly from countless pawprints. "Mind the space, we didn't expect visitors."

Once Willowcloud's eyes adjusted to the lack of light, she held back a gasp. The tunnel, which had led steeply down, opened to a rather expansive den. Smaller, connective tunnels could be seen on either side of the chamber, and in the center laid the warriors of WindClan, just as scared and hungry as their woodland counterparts.

Runningstar padded over from where he stood, wearing a sour expression. "Don't get too comfortable." He said.

Willowcloud felt compelled to shred his ears.

It was a wonder how Badgerstar only nodded kindly. "Thank you, Runningstar."

Cloudwatcher showed the Clan where they could sleep, and mentioned that they could take the connecting tunnels to the other dens for the elders and medicine cats. Badgerstar thanked the medicine cat profusely and told his cats to get some greatly needed rest.

Sunstrike invited Willowcloud to make a nest next to him and

Woodclaw. She scraped a small dip in the ground and curled up tightly while scents of the unfamiliar underground camp flooded her nose.

She still had trouble comprehending how they ended up in WindClan's tunnels. The past day was merely a rush of scenes, stitched together roughly into a foul tapestry.

Willowcloud tossed and turned for what seemed a while. She didn't know how much time had passed, as the tunnel entrance was no indicator; a constant gray glow emanating from its mouth.

Her head rested on her paws as she surveyed the room after fitful rest. A nest over, Sunstrike dozed peacefully, his chest rising and falling in rhythm. Ahead, she noticed a figure approaching, a bounce in its step.

"I couldn't help but notice you're awake." It said. She could see that it was a ginger tom, and he took long-legged strides.

She yawned. *A bit nosy, are we?* She bit her tongue just in time before she made a sarcastic remark. Instead, she chose her words more politely. "I am. " Her eyes couldn't help but narrow in curiosity.

"I'm Rabbitnose. I've seen you at Gatherings before; Willowcloud, right?" He clearly wasn't asking the question, as his eyes shone with recognition. "Is it true that ThunderClan has flooded?"

Willowcloud nodded slowly. "Yes, and yes." Though she felt a flea of irritation at the tom's prodding questions.

"That's awful. Well please do make yourself at home here." He waved his tail at the expansive cavern. Willowcloud couldn't help but gaze around at it. "How about a tour?"

She opened her jaws, about to decline, but Rabbitnose was already padding away. "Come on, it'll be fun." He called back.

Willowcloud heaved herself to her paws. For a moment she felt a wave of panic flood her, and her breath came in short gasps. *No! Not now. . .* She forced her eyes to stare ahead of her and she took

one shaky step at a time.

Slowly, it began to recede like a tide.

"C'mon! Old Snaggletooth walks faster than you." Rabbitnose padded back over to her. Upon seeing her blank stare, he rested his tail tip over her shoulder. "Hey, hey, are you alright? We don't have to take the tour right now." He began to guide her back to her nest.

Willowcloud blinked. "No, no it's okay. I'm sorry, I just..." She gave her head a tiny shake. "Let's take the tour." She was determined not to let her thoughts wander back to that dark place.

Rabbitnose quivered his whiskers. "Okay, great." He turned around again and led Willowcloud to the connecting tunnel to one side.

The tunnel itself was spacious enough for several cats to walk side by side, and Willowcloud was reminded of a less comfortable arrangement, the tunnel at the edge of ThunderClan territory. *Is it flooded too? Maybe we could have used it instead of begging for another Clan's mercy.*

"Not many know about our additions to the camp," Rabbitnose said. He looked back at Willowcloud. It was clear he was excited to show her around. "We began digging them a little after the Great Battle so we could have somewhere safe to take shelter in."

The tunnel gently sloped upward, and the faint scent of milk filled the air. Willowcloud breathed it in deeply and recalled her days in the nursery. And Jaykit. *I wonder if Frostflower is with you up there, little Jaykit. I hope she keeps you safe.*

Rabbitnose beckoned for her to hurry up. "You can probably tell this is the nursery, but there are no queens right now." He nodded towards the empty nest.

Rabbitnose continued to show the ThunderClan cat around the tunnels of WindClan, much to her awe. It seemed to go on forever, and felt safe, unlike the small cramped tunnels at the outskirts of Willowcloud's own forest.

He explained how it took generations to carve out the tunnels, and

more to refine them into what they were today. Truly, nobody could tell there was raging storm outside.

Willowcloud returned to her nest where Sunstrike watched her approach with relief glowing in his eyes.

"There you are!" He said, rushing over and giving her ears a lick.

She flicked her tail in annoyance. "I'm not a kit." She could almost see Rabbitnose's amused look behind her back.

Sunstrike's tail dropped. "I didn't mean it like that." His eyes flickered to Rabbitnose, and Willowcloud saw them harden for a heartbeat.

The WindClan tom padded up and gave a friendly flick of his tail. "Sorry about that, I was just showing her around. I'm Rabbitnose." Sunstrike acknowledged him with a nod. "How about we go check on the storm?"

They followed Rabbitnose up the slope of the warriors' tunnel and into the dip of the WindClan camp.

Rain continued to pelt them, and though the camp sheltered the cats from the wind, the rim of the hollow was nearly flattened from it. The three braced against the gusts and peered out over the moorlands.

The gray sky cast a desolate look upon the rolling hills and scattered debris. From her vantage point atop the hill, Willowcloud gaped at the landscape. It matched her dream with an uncanny resemblance. She felt her breath catch in her throat.

Beside her, a sharp gasp. She followed the toms' gaze straight to the lake, where a long tendril of a cloud was reaching from the sky. Willowcloud froze in terror.

It curled into a spiral shape and twisted toward the water until it contacted a whistling sound.

The cats struggled to find words as the column of water and wind kicked up spray.

"What in StarClan's name is that?" Sunstrike breathed.

The water spout shuddered. Then it began to move towards their side of the lake.

*Happy holidays, Clanmates! So I just got off of classes for winter break, which means there might be another update before New Years :D*

*Oh and thoughts on how the story is going? Do you feel bad for Willowcloud, or do you think she had it coming? Predictions on what will happen next?*

# Chapter 29 > > Take Cover

The cats exchanged a look of sheer panic.

Willowcloud was the first to whip around and run back down the slope. Her wild eyes darted for Badgerstar, Runningstar, anyone. She spotted Cloudwatcher first; the old tom glanced up at her in surprise.

"Do you hear that noise too?" He swiveled his ears.

She nodded breathlessly. "Something...it's over the lake!"

The medicine cat's face widened in horror. He led the way as he made for the leader's tunnel entrance. Unlike the rest of the tunnels, his was located further away and padded with springy moss.

Before Cloudwatcher could call his leader's name, Runningstar nearly collided with the cats. The wiry tom nodded for them to speak.

Cloudwatcher stepped aside to let Willowcloud come forth, still panting.

"Runningstar, there's some kind of spinning cloud coming our way!" She said. Behind her, Rabbitnose and Sunstrike nodded furiously.

The WindClan leader pushed past them and darted up the slope to where the young warriors had been standing. More slowly, the others trailed.

As Willowcloud emerged back into the WindClan camp, she noticed a growing crowd of cats around her. They swiveled their ears to try and find the sound's source.

Finally, Runningstar turned around to address the cats. His expression gave nothing away, and he raised his tail for silence. "WindClan and ThunderClan, I --"

Before Runningstar could finish, the shrill whistling faded into a dull roaring. Everyone paused to glance around and horrified gasps rose above the storm.

Willowcloud watched as the clouds morphed and contorted into horrible and unnatural shapes. The roaring grew only louder.

"Your attention!" Runningstar commanded. He fixed his stony eyes on the gathered. "There is some kind of cloud that has dropped from the sky and is coming towards us." He paused as the cats exchanged words. "But this is why our ancestors chose to build the tunnels. I am ordering everyone to stay underground until further notice."

Before the cats dissembled, Driftbreeze stepped forward. "What about Badgerstar and his warriors? He is still our surveying the territory!"

Runningstar responded without hesitation, "Then I hope he has enough sense to find shelter because no cats are leaving this camp." The leader bounded down and ushered his clanmates and the others into the tunnels, clearly leaving no room for discussion.

And as Willowcloud followed Sunstrike, her blood was ice. *Who else is in that group? Why is Badgerstar out there?* Just before she entered the tunnel, the roaring amplified and great gusts of wind blew her fur the wrong way. Dust filled her throat and she coughed.

Sunstrike looked back, concern in his eyes. "Are you alright?"

Willowcloud nodded, holding back another series of coughs.

When everyone had filed into the tunnels, Runningstar made sure everyone was accounted for.

Rabbitnose stuck with Willowcloud, Sunstrike, and eventually Woodclaw. The WindClan tom informed them on just how sturdy these tunnels were, and how it would take "a whole army of twolegs" to tear it down.

Which led Willowcloud to wonder how powerful this spinning cloud was.

After Rabbitnose finished, the cats sat quietly and flattened their ears against the sounds.

Heartbeats later, the sounds grew to an indescribable thundering that seemed to fill her entire body, louder than that of any thunderclap or falling tree. Beneath her paws, the ground itself trembled and flecks of dirt rained from the tunnel's ceiling.

All the cats in the tunnels pressed together, Clan allegiances suddenly forgotten. Willowcloud could feel the pelts of the toms against hers.

Everything continued to shake and Willowcloud began to wonder if she would be seeing Frostflower soon. The idea made her shrink.

She pricked her ears as another noise sounded, this one fainter. It was a crumbling and shifting, and it arose worried mews from the WindClan cats.

Finally, after she felt like her pelt had been shaken off, the rumbling lessened until it faded away. The roaring had done so too, and yet the cats remained silent for several heartbeats, casting nervous glances at their Clanmates.

Woodclaw rose shakily to his paws and his brother followed. The toms paused to listen for any more noises.

They were greeted with eerie silence.

Everyone pushed and shoved so they would be the first to catch a glimpse of the aftermath. Willowcloud found herself jostled to the back of the herd, so she pricked her ears for her Clanmates' responses.

"Great StarClan...."

"The apprentices' den collapsed!" Rabbitnose's voice shouted over the clamor.

As the Clans hurried out into the camp, Willowcloud finally had a chance to survey the damage. Her eyes stretched wide in shock.

The grass and earth were torn up and laying in haphazard piles all over the camp. As Rabbitnose had pointed out, the entrance to the apprentice's tunnel had been reduced to a pile of debris. *At least there were no cats in there*. She reminded herself. *Everyone had huddled in the warrior's tunnel.*

The rivets dug to divert rainwater had been destroyed, too. *Now they have to worry about flooding.*

But the one positive thing she noticed was how suddenly the storm mellowed out. No thunder sounded, no lightning flashed. Even the rain was reduced to a light sprinkling.

"We need to send someone to look for Badgerstar's patrol," Driftbreeze said, her narrowed eyes focused on Runningstar's.

The WindClan leader waved his tail. "If you must. Though keep *my* warriors out of it."

Driftbreeze immediately began to assemble a group. "Wasn't planning on it." Herself, Woodclaw, Brightblossom, and Oakfur left WindClan camp before its leader had a chance to react.

Willowcloud was almost too overcome to remember her own leader's absence. She wasn't even sure if he was alive. *How many have died? And how many more need to before this is over?* She stumbled up the camp's incline to glimpse the lake.

Then, a red pelt flashed before her eyes and Sunstrike was pressing against her. He helped her climb the slope. "Will we ever be able to return to normal?" she whispered.

"Depends on what you define normal as." Sunstrike murmured. "Things won't be the same, that's for sure."

Willowcloud lowered her head. "I want Frostflower back." Her voice was barely a breath.

"We just have to make do with what we have." The tom nuzzled her cheek. "But at least we've got each other."

Ordinarily, Willowcloud would have been startled. But instead, a

flutter in her stomach told her to cherish his words. A purr, raspy from disuse, rose in her throat.

They sat upon the rise and watched as light broke through the heavy clouds and washed the lake with color. It illuminated the fallen trees, scattered branches, and lastly, the faces of two young cats.

Faces, though heavy with grief, carried an unbreakable hope for the future.

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*Happy 2017, everybody! Here's a little chapter to start out the New Year :3*

# Chapter 30 > > Moment of Silence

Driftbreeze's patrol returned with the ThunderClan leader's in tow, picking their way around the littered wreckage. The ThunderClan cats had gathered eagerly to hear what Badgerstar had to say. While they did so, Willowcloud realized the old tom looked wearier than ever before. Driftbreeze seemed to notice as well, for she shooed away her Clanmates and ushered her mate inside the tunnels.

A small part of Willowcloud wanted to eavesdrop on what the pair had to say. Several moons ago, she would have done it too. But without her best friend by her side, such an idea was dull.

Instead, the gray she-cat returned to her place at the hill's rise. Thoughts swarmed her like a hive of bees but she dismissed the buzzing with a flick of her whiskers. She heaved an inward sigh at the sound of pawsteps approaching. *The last thing I want to do is talk.*

But the cat beside her didn't speak. They sat in a comfortable silence.

Then there was a sigh, and the voice of Pondpaw spoke up. "I remember when we were kits and there was a hawk circling the camp, and instead of staying in the nursery, Frostflower slipped away and yelled at it. Thought it would get scared and fly away." Pondpaw made a sound halfway in between a sob and a chuckle. Willowcloud recalled the memory vividly, her heart warming.

There was another span of silence, both cats reflecting on their own thoughts.

Finally, the tug of hunger was too great for Willowcloud, and she dipped her head to Pondpaw as she left.

And it was after sharing a rabbit with her parents and exchanging hopeful remarks, she realized it was her first meal since Frostflower died. *Has it been so long already?*

"Badgerstar said he wants to return to our territory in a few sunrises," Hollyheart said. She ran a paw along her cheek, smoothing out the fur.

Oakfur's eyes shone with concern. "So soon after he's lost a life?" His voice lowered.

Willowcloud froze with her paw in midair.

Hollyheart nodded. "I, too, would prefer to be under the trees once more. It doesn't feel right to be here." She waved her tail at the confining walls of the tunnel.

"I'm afraid it will take time for our camp to drain," Oakfur pointed out. He gave his shoulder fur several licks.

Hollyheart shrugged. "I trust Badgerstar's decision."

Willowcloud's head was swimming with this new information. "Badgerstar... he lost a life?" She said.

Oakfur and Hollyheart looked to her gently.

"He has, but Fawndapple is with him," Oakfur said.

"He's doing fine," Hollyheart added.

Willowcloud could only imagine how many more lives the old leader had. *What if he's on his last life? What will ThunderClan do?* She noticed the gazes of her parents upon her. Worried. So she bit her fears and replied steadily, "Okay, glad he's doing better."

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Though the clouds still obscured most of the sky, sun rays poked through patches. It came as a great relief to the Clan cats, for they had tired of seeing the gray-tinted landscape of their home.

And standing at the top of a hill soaking in the light was ThunderClan. A light breeze lifted their pelts.

Since the water spout, the two Clans worked together clearing storm-tossed branches and debris. They managed to clear the collapsed apprentices' den, the rest of the camp; the cats ended up making a mound of trash at the edge of WindClan's borders.

They had fallen into a rhythm, leaving Clan distinctions by the wayside. Even the wary Runningstar had warmed up to the ThunderClan visitors enough to share prey with its leader.

Making goodbyes that much harder.

"I hope we don't cross each other in battle," Rabbitnose said, amusement lighting his eyes. He nuzzled both her and Sunstrike, who was just as melancholy.

Willowcloud nodded. "Thank you for being so kind to me, to all of us."

Badgerstar finished thanking Runningstar while his clanmates bid their last farewells to the WindClan cats.

As Badgerstar regrouped his cats and they moved back towards the forest, Willowcloud realized how familiar she had grown with WindClan in the short time she had spent there. She allowed herself one last look back to the moors. The grasses swayed gently in the wind, waving goodbye.

When they came upon the river, they found its banks had gone down since their first crossing. Badgerstar didn't hesitate as he led them to a narrower portion. From there they crossed, hardly wetting their paws.

However, upon reentering their own territory the cats' paws grew less sure. Small conversations faded as the clanmates gazed at the destruction. Trees they used to know from memory had fallen. Familiar bushes and sprigs of flowers were nowhere to be found. They grieved silently for their territory as if it were a lost clanmate.

On their way to the gorge, the Clan came across a tree with long

wispy branches. Willowcloud knew it was the tree for which she was named. The rest of the Clan passed by without so much as a second glance, but she lingered.

Its trunk was bent where the wind had buffeted it, and silver droplets of rain sparkled on the ends of its branches. She narrowed her eyes as, at the tree's base, she spotted a beautiful white flower. A single petal was torn away and the blossom was beginning to shrivel.

For an instant, Willowcloud thought she caught a whiff of Frostflower's scent, but before she could breathe it in, one of her clanmates nudged her onward.

It came as no surprise to them when they checked on their camp and found it swamped. Slimy branches bobbed over what used to be their dens.

Badgerstar declared their temporary camp in the nearby swath of trees until the gorge was livable again.

Willowcloud suppressed a shudder from memories of their last temporary camp. She had promised herself to quit overthinking those thoughts, but it was easier said than done.

She and her clanmates had time to rest under the dappled shade before nightfall, when cats for the Gathering were chosen.

It felt strange to be going to the Gathering so soon after the storm. She had forgotten about RiverClan and ShadowClan, and how they must've fared. For so long she was preoccupied with her own issues. It made her walk with a bounce in her step as she followed her clanmates down towards the lake, which bulged with lapping waves.

"You've been so strong, Willowcloud," Brightblossom said to her former apprentice, her mismatched eyes gleaming. She padded quickly to keep up with the tabby she-cat.

Willowcloud dipped her head graciously. "I've been fortunate to have cats who care about me. When I felt alone, I knew they were

always tail-lengths away." She knew she could trust her old mentor with such personal thoughts. And as she spoke them, she realized just how true it was. A warm feeling spread through her pelt.

As ThunderClan approached the fallen tree bridge, they noticed how the dark water washed over the top of the log. It glowed in the speckled starlight. With words of caution from Badgerstar, the cats picked their way across.

Willowcloud breathed in the scents of the other Clans, a strangely comforting smell. Sunstrike padded to her side and together they found a place with their clanmates to chat.

Birdeye slunk past them, giving a friendly nod as she did so.

"Is Birdeye okay?" Willowcloud said in mock surprise.

Sunstrike snorted in amusement. "Good to see your sarcasm is back." He nuzzled her cheek gently.

She gave him a playful shove.

Up front, Otterstar called for silence as he began to speak. Willowcloud realized they had been the last Clan to arrive and quickly fell quiet. The cats around her did the same and turned their attention to the brown furred leader.

"I see we all have coped with the storm." He glanced to the other three leaders. "RiverClan was forced to evacuate our territory due to flooding and we have set up a shared camp with ShadowClan by the small thunderpath in between our borders. However, we suffered the losses of Freckleface and Brownpatch." His eyes were heavy.

Frogstar was the next to speak, his unruly fur looking more so than ever before. "A similar situation occurred to us, but now we are safe... with RiverClan. Though we, too, lost a clanmate – Tigerleap."

The cats below began to lower their heads when Frogstar interrupted them. "Please, let's save our remembrance until every Clan has spoken." The old tom nodded to Runningstar.

"Thank you, Frogstar. WindClan's camp did hold, and we welcomed

ThunderClan to stay with us after theirs flooded. I am grateful to say we did not have any losses. Our camp proved fit to protect us from the spinning cloud, thank StarClan."

*'Welcomed' might not be the right word. More like obligated by the warrior code,* Willowcloud remarked silently.

Badgerstar was the last to speak, and he did so after a heavy sigh. "ThunderClan has survived, as we always have. I would like to thank WindClan once again for allowing us to stay with them."

Runningstar gave a quick nod.

"But we did lose one of our young warriors, Frostflower. Let us never forget those taken by the storm. I now would like to have a moment of silence to honor the cats who have left us to be amongst the stars." Badgerstar said, and closed his eyes.

Willowcloud opened hers, staring up at the radiant moon. She let her eyes travel over the stars, pondering which was Frostflower's. She decided it was the bright star next to a tiny one. *It's her and Jaykit.*

She had to avert her eyes as they filled with emotion. Though she missed her best friend with every breath she took, Willowcloud knew she was in StarClan now. *And she would want me to live my life to the fullest, with or without her.*

Before the leaders climbed from their perches, Otterstar stood to speak. "I think it would be best if we all extended our paws to Clans who need help recovering."

From around the roots of the trees, the medicine cats murmured approval.

To everyone's surprise, Frogstar was the first to nod. "ShadowClan. . . would be thankful for assistance. Much of our land is overrun with water and litter."

Willowcloud had never seen such unity, and based on the senior warrior's expressions, neither had they. Yet cats from all four Clans raised their voices to pitch support.

It became decided the leaders would send patrols of warriors to each Clan to help with whatever they needed. Clearing the territory suddenly sounded like a much more doable task. She tried to spot her friends from WindClan, but couldn't find them before the Gathering was called to a close.

Willowcloud stared at the ground as she padded back home, her head bursting with thoughts. And instead of worrying, she found herself looking forward to helping the other Clans.

Sunstrike laid his tail over her shoulders. "Are you alright?"

Willowcloud blinked warmly at him. "I'm okay." And for the first time in a while, she believed it.

# Epilogue

Willowcloud's paws followed those of her clanmates as they returned from ShadowClan's camp. Her muscles ached furiously yet she couldn't be more content.

Earlier, a stubborn tree trunk had taken their combined strength to roll down to the lake. She recalled the hardest part being maneuvering it through the peaty forest.

As the group of cats crossed back into their own scent markers, Willowcloud was struck with the memory of the tunnels. The tunnels that she had followed the other apprentices through so long ago.

She had checked on them of course. Only a sunrise after the Gathering, her and Sunstrike retraced their old pawsteps to the secluded clearing where the entrance lay.

Only to find it collapsed and muddy.

From there, Willowcloud knew her old life was over and it was up to her to create a new one.

Once Willowcloud brushed into camp she laid down beside Sunstrike, her mate's red fur warm. An entire moon had passed since the Gathering and ThunderClan had just returned to the gorge, most of the water having left.

She wrapped her tail tightly over her nose. Her sleep had been dreamless since her best friend's death, which felt like so long ago. As it began to swamp her, rather than running away she acknowledged it, and its grip on her lessened. It was something she was working on, and didn't always succeed, but it helped.

Beside her, Sunstrike rolled onto his back. "Goodnight," He yawned.

"You too," She replied.

Usually, sleep came to her slowly, but tonight it washed over her like a dark wave.

Willowcloud opened her eyes to find herself under the long branches of a willow tree. More specifically, the exact willow tree she had seen when returning to ThunderClan. The same white flower was at its base, although it was now complete and vibrant.

Dappled sunlight broke through the leaves and Willowcloud saw the shadow of another cat against the tree's trunk.

A quick glance back revealed a fiery pelt radiating with light.

"Firestar," Willowcloud breathed, dipping her head in respect.

The orange tom returned the gesture. "How have you been faring?" he asked, sitting beside her.

"Okay, I suppose," Willowcloud said. A whirlwind of questions pleaded to be asked. She couldn't help but blurt out, "Everything's over, but I still don't understand. Why was I chosen? There's nothing I could have done to stop the storm. I... I just don't get it." She looked to the tom, begging he would divulge the answers.

He stood before her. "Willowcloud, you were chosen because we could foresee some of your future. You had growing to do but so much potential to fulfill, thus a prophecy was the best way to accomplish it."

"And yes, perhaps there were some things that could have gone differently, but much of it was fate. You carried it with the dignity and strength of a true warrior. Maybe. . . even more. Your story isn't over quite yet." His dazzling eyes glimmered for a moment.

Before Willowcloud had the chance to analyze his words, Firestar rose and parted the curtain of leaves with his tail. "I believe there's someone here to see you."

Willowcloud felt all the breath leave her body as she glanced up to see a ginger and white she-cat approach. Countless glittering stars

sparkled in her pelt and shimmered in her pawprints. Her bright blue eyes met with Willowcloud's green ones and the two best friends rushed for each other, purring furiously.

"Frostflower," Willowcloud breathed. "I've missed you so much! It's like I've lost my other half."

Frostflower gently pulled away so she could look Willowcloud in the eye. "You think it's any easier up here? I can see you but can't offer my sarcastic suggestions when you do something stupid – which is a lot."

Willowcloud purred louder in amusement. Seeing Frostflower as a warrior of StarClan was the most bittersweet she had ever felt. Her purring trailed off and her gaze darkened.

"You don't. . . you don't blame me, do you?" She said softly.

"For wha- oh." Frostflower shook her head. "oh, no. I should have known better."

"But you shouldn't have died over something so naïve. In that case, I should be here in your place since it was my idea." Willowcloud felt her throat tighten and couldn't bear to look up.

Frostflower sighed. "Willowcloud. Back in ThunderClan I would have never understood, but once I entered StarClan, I realize that there are some things that just *happen*." She paused, and Willowcloud saw starry water gathering in Frostflower's eyes. "While it's unfortunate-- no, it's *terrible* that we won't be able to share our lives together, we can't change what has happened."

Frostflower nuzzled her friend. "I, too, have seen great things in your future. So you better not let a dead cat hold you back!"

Willowcloud nodded silently. She noticed the edges of her vision fading away and looked frantically between Firestar and Frostflower.

"No! Please, don't go!" She begged, succumbing to her emotions. Somewhere, deep down in her heart, Willowcloud knew she wouldn't see her friend again until it was her time to don the stars.

Frostflower, her form beginning to vanish, touched noses with her friend. "I'll save a spot for you up here. Until then, go be a hero. That way I can brag about being your best friend."

Willowcloud chuckled and watched as Frostflower disappeared, and Firestar padded in front of her.

The former leader rested his chin atop her head. "Go now. Live your life. And be the cat you were destined to be."

Willowcloud nodded, feeling her heart swell with resolve. She knew she would be able to handle whatever else came her way. She was a warrior.

"I will. You have my word."

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*And with that, the book is over. I would like to thank all the readers, commenters, voters, and everyone else for making this book possible. I really couldn't have done it without you guys - this would have ended up as an abandoned draft stuck in some folder.*

*I hope you've enjoyed my book, and if not please don't hesitate to let me know why. Like I've said before, I'm always looking on how to improve.*

*Well I should be wrapping this up.*

*Thanks once again, and I hope to see you around.*

*~ May StarClan light your path ~*

# Sequel

It's here, after a shockingly short period of planning. I'll admit, I'm kinda nervous. Kinda as in *what am I doing* sort of way.

In a burst of inspiration, I managed to pen the first 3 chapters and muster enough excitement to start the fourth. I plan for this story to be more concise. And with regular(ish) updates. Let's see how that goes.

Worries aside, I'm excited for you guys to read the next chapter of Willowcloud's life.

I've decided on the title Shattered Peace, and the Prologue and first chapter are already up.

Check it out, if you're interested.

Until then, may StarClan light your path!